Adventure

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS
1943

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Complete
Novelette

RIPLETS
RIUMPHANT"

ROBERT V. CARR

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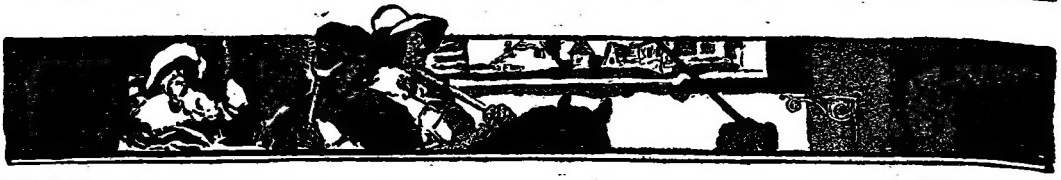

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THE December *Adventure* will be out November 3rd and we give "The Trail Ahead" here, keeping its usual place, the last page, for some letters we'd like to have you see when you've read this. You're likely to like the December number very much, for these are some of the things you'll find in it:

The Stolen War Secret **A Story of Craig Kennedy, Scientific Detective** ***By Arthur B. Reeve***
A complete novelette of intrigue, adventure and mystery. You know *Craig Kennedy.*

Lancing the Whale **An Adventure of Dick Anthony of Arran** ***By Talbot Mundy***
A complete novelette in which *Dick Anthony*—well, he stirs up quite *some* excitement this month, but next month is more so.

A Man With Nine Lives—A Two-Part Story ***By Richard Marsh***
The first half of this stirring story is in itself almost full book-size—a fine large piece of reading.

Come-On Charley Tries Out Wall Street ***By Thomas Addison***
Come-On Charley, judging from your many letters, has made a tremendous hit. What he does to Wall Street will surely make you chuckle.

Spangles and Soapsuds **A Miss Dem. Story** ***By C. Hilton-Turvey***
Like *Come-On, Miss Dem*, already has a big following. This story will make it still bigger.

Immediate Lee ***By Kenneth B. Clarke***
Here is a Western story. In it is a man who squares accounts, and squares them hard.

"For Ways That Are Dark" ***By Norman Springer***
Short but strong. The kind that sticks in your mind.

AND OTHERS!

Alaska, Louisiana, a circus-tent, the Balkans—some or all of these will be added to the above.

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Triplets Triumphant

A Tale of the Jetts Brothers, Cowboys Errant.

by

Robert V. Carr

CHAPTER I

Little old town, I love you,
You sure are my delight;
I love you in the daytime,
And I love you in the night.
—*Cowboy Lyric.*

THE Jetts triplets, Jack, Jeb and Joe, stood up in their stirrups, bending their bodies stiffly at the hips, and, with hands resting on saddle-horns, rode in what was considered the height of range style. At times they swayed, throwing the weight first on one stirrup and then the other.

In such fashion are cowboys wont to enter town. However, the position must not savor of affectation, or what is cowboyily termed, "puttin' on dog;" in that event some town wag is very apt to toss his hands skyward in clownish fear, and beseech the rider:

"Don't shoot! 'Fer the love o' Heaven, please don't shoot!"

As the three pulled in at the ford to water their horses, Jack soberly addressed his brothers.

"Now, boys, fer Gosh-a'mighty's sake, let's see if we can't go to town jes' this once—specially as she's the Fourth of July—and not make fools of ourselves. Like enough we'll call on the Hemington twins, and Mrs. Hemington is a lady what don't 'low her girls to 'sociate with rounders.

"Them Hemington folks was right kind to us, boys—and say, though she's a perfect

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lady, that Mrs. Hemington is sure a cut-up. Actually she don't look a day older than her daughters. They're sure nice people — right nice, common - every - day folks."

He outlined his plan.

"Here's the round-up program, boys: Put up the bronks, then call on the Hemington folks. We'll want to see if they're figgerin' on goin' to the dance, and if they have comp'ny. If they ain't no comp'ny, we'll be there with bells on. After we've talked a spell we'll drift downtown and take, say, three drinks apiece—but no more. My idee is not to be so good that it's painful, but not to disgrace ourselves.

"I'm gittin' derned good and sick of havin' respectable folks say the minute we hit town: 'When'd them drunken pups git in? It's jes' the mercy of —— somebody don't beef them low-down scuffs of creation. What kin the Marshal be a-thinkin' of that he ain't pulled 'em long ago! They ought to be shot, hung and drowned.' Yes siree, boys, I'm dead sick of such talk. We got to shorten rope."

Joe grinned across the tossing mane of Jack's horse at Jeb, who slyly winked comprehension of some subtle telepathic message.

"Where'd we hear old Jack spout like that before? Seems I heard him say something like that last time we hit yonder burg."

Jack dodged playfully.

"I preached," he admitted a little sheepishly; "and we got in more fuss and trouble than bulldogs and badgers. But this time I mean what I say."

A series of explosions issuing from the heart of the distant town prevented a sarcastic reply Jeb had framed while his brother was impressing upon them the third of the three cowboy commandments, "Rope, ride and refrain." He gave a joyous whoop and spurred his horse up out of the shallows.

"Yip—e-e-e—ya-ow!" he yelled. "We got our dates mixed. Tomorrow's the Fourth. It's jes' little old Yellowstone startin' in early—she's always ahead of time. Come on, boys!"

Three guns sprang from three well worn holsters; and, shouting and shooting, and racing their horses, the cowboy triplets made a dashing entrance into the bunting-draped and flag-decorated town.

The dusty main street of Yellowstone was lined with buckboards, spring wagons and saddle-horses. Girls in white dresses and blue sashes, cowboys in shirts that shamed the rainbow, and weather-beaten old-timers softened by the sight of many old familiar faces, crowded the sidewalks in endless promenade.

Here a cowboy halts a teacher, a partner at the last Christmas dance, and beseeches her to "come and have some ice-cream or somethin'." An old-timer lays an affectionate hand upon the shoulder of a brother pioneer and they recall the days of Indian warfare, the wagons in a circle and the night alarms. Range mothers meet, and exhibit their candy-sucking children with maternal pride.

In every heart is the pride of the Western American. It is a good country. Tomorrow the orator of the day will tell them all about it.

He will pound the table, rend his garments, gulp ice-water, and use those good old expressions that seem ever to bring applause:

"Starry banner, emblematic of freedom. God's footstool. The sacred blood of patriots. The nation's natal day."

THE Jetts brothers, widely known and popular because of their honest hearts, engaging grins and fearless souls, were given a welcome as wild as their reckless entrance. They pulled their horses back on their haunches, and with much *éclat* dismounted in front of the Round-up saloon.

A roaring crowd of celebrants received the triplets with open arms; and on the crest of a wave of patriotic, as well as alcoholic, enthusiasm they were borne into the saloon and cast against the bar. There, forgetful of Jack's sermon at the ford, they vociferously proclaimed—

"Our money's down — our money's down!"

"Bowl up, bowl up, bowl up, everybody!" insisted Jack with a war-whoop that nearly lifted his hat from his head.

And then, as busy bartenders set forth bottles and glasses, the three howled in chorus, "Drink hearty!"

The crowd thundered back, "Happy days!" Rude jokes were passed, and there was much horse-play and scuffling.

The triplets began what might have been termed an alcoholic grand-march. From

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saloon to saloon, followed by admiring friends, they surged, their freckled faces bathed in perspiration, and in their eyes the light of unholy joy. They scattered their money like chaff, and bade all within hearing—

"Name your pizen—*name it!*"

In the rear of the Round-up, to which they finally returned, a negro through an opening in a partition dispensed Hamburger and egg sandwiches to those bitten of hunger.

To the African Jack turned sudden and trouble-hunting attention.

"Here, you Sam!" he yelled, elbowing his way through the crowd, "trot out some solid food; be fast and keep your claws offn it."

The negro, feeling secure behind his partition, made bold to remark—

"Will you take hit now, or wait till Ah give hit to yuh?" He rolled his eyes truculently.

Jack immediately shoved his head through the hole in the partition, calling on his brothers to give him a lift.

Nothing loath, Jeb and Joe each seized a leg and Jack squirmed through the narrow opening, declaring—

"No black man kin lip a Jetts and live."

Following the disappearance of Jack's spurs through the opening there ensued terrific thumpings, flounderings and poundings.

"Old Jack's sure gittin' that colored brother." cried Jeb joyously.

The riot continued in the little kitchen. The crowd heard the crash of tin pans, the hailstone rattle of breaking glass, and then the sound of running feet.

Presently Jack's head appeared in the opening, the cook's cap perched jauntily upon his auburn locks. He bawled the ritual of the round-up cook—

"Come and git it, or I'll throw it all away."

But not for long was the cook-disciplining Jack permitted to act the rôle of chef. His brothers dragged him back through the opening, and again bade the bartenders to "set out everything."

Hank Morrow, the Sheriff, came shouldering good-naturedly through the crowd. The triplets greeted him boisterously, but he raised a hand in mild remonstrance against the uproar.

"Jes' a minute, boys," he requested.

The crowd, holding him in great esteem, immediately gave him respectful attention. The officer placed an affectionate hand on Jack's shoulder.

"I want everybody to have a good time," he told them paternally. "The Marshal and me ain't so hide-bound that we don't know that 'most anything goes at a time like this. But things are a little diff'rent than they used to be, boys. This is no longer a man's country; we have the women and children with us. Fer them reasons I'll have to ask that there be no gun-packin'. As a favor I want everybody to turn over his guns to the nearest bartender."

The appeal was not in vain. The guns of the triplets crashed on the bar.

The Sheriff flung a handful of silver on the mahogany and shouted—

"Everybody have something on me."

Then, after the celebrants had wished the Sheriff all possible happiness, the officer departed, an air of benign majesty about him.

The impression that the triplets were drunk may have gained credence, but such was not true; they were merely joyful. And to prove that intelligence had not departed, Jack suddenly whirled away from the bar and reminded his brothers that their horses were awaiting attention and care.

The three flung off the restraining hands that would fain hold them in the bar-line.

"Got to put up the bronks," they informed their friends, loath for even a few minutes to lose their joyful company.

Down the street the three swaggered leading their horses, spurs jingling and chaps flapping. They began singing—

"We're goin' home, no more to roam,
All safe from sin and sorrer."

Friends and round-up associates called to them from the sidewalk, but to all invitations they waved exaggerated refusals.

"We have done swore off," Jack yelled over his shoulder to a group that seemed about to charge down on them and carry them into a saloon. "Don't take nothin' stronger than water now."

And onward they pressed with the awkward, wide-legged stride of riders, singing in a mournful key over and over again—

"We're goin' home, no more to roam,
All safe from sin and sorrer."

After unsaddling their horses and turning them into the corral, the three smoked and watched the broncos roll.

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Jack made the old-time observation regarding his horse.

"See there, boys, he rolled cl'ar over. Don't tell me that bronk ain't worth a hundred of any man's money."

The eldest Jetts—eldest by a few minutes—flipped the ashes from his cigarette and swore softly.

"What's up, Jack?" asked Jeb.

"It's jes' as I expected," came the mournful reply. "After all I said down at the ford we've gone and done it. I wouldn't blame them Hemington folks if they never spoke to us ag'in in Gosh-a'mighty's world."

"Huh!" exclaimed Jeb, as if he had just thought of a great crime. "We have sure queered ourselves this trip. Why didn't you check us, Jack—when we started to joyin' up?"

"Might as well try to check a pair of locoed steers," Jack snapped.

"Well," said Joe hopefully, "we didn't git drinkin' drunk. We're as sober as deacons right now. Maybe they won't hear of it."

Jack looked at his brothers with comical hopelessness; and then, hitching up his trousers, proceeded firmly to expound the law.

"This here chargin' around ends right here. We'll take a chance that the Hemingtons ain't heard about our whoop-up, and try fer their comp'ny to the dance tonight. Still," he pondered, "I guess jes' you two had better call on them. I'll hang around downtown——"

"Why can't you come along?" interrupted Jeb. "I thought that was your idee in the first place. Of course me and Joe will take the girls, but there's their maw. Mrs. Hemington is a right nice woman; you could be comp'ny fer her."

"She sure is nice, Mrs. Hemington is," mused Jack. "Always treated me like I was a king. I don't know but what that's a good idee, Jeb. We'll all go up and make it a sort of a family affair."

"That's the checker!" exclaimed Joe happily. "Mrs. Hemington is the mother of grown girls, but that's no sign she don't like to flip her heel now and then. Take a woman not over forty, and well preserved, as the feller says, and she likes a good time as well as any girl. I'll bet she'll be glad to cut in."

"All right, boys," agreed Jack. "It's me fer the widder. I never did care much fer girls nohow. Take a widder and she kin talk to a man. All a girl kin do is to primp and giggle."

THEY left the stage barn and turned up a side street that led to the Hemington home.

Mrs. Hemington received the cowboys cordially; and the twins modestly permitted Jeb and Joe to squeeze their hands.

When Jack proposed that the widow accompany her daughters to the dance, Mrs. Hemington raised her hands in mock consternation.

"Land, boys, you don't want an old woman to crowd in with young folks, do you?"

Jack fixed a stern eye on the widow.

"Mrs. Hemington, how kin you talk that way when I've been figgerin' all Spring on goin' to a dance with you? Old! Why, if I didn't know you folks, I'd think you and your girls was sisters. And that's a plumb fact."

He glared fiercely at his brothers, who rapturously seconded his sentiments.

The widow laughed gaily.

"Of all the young joshers! Well, boys, I'll go along—that is, if you insist."

"We insist," chorused the three.

"You'll stay to supper, won't you?" asked the widow.

"Like to," demurred Jack, "but we won't have time hardly. Got to git slicked up a little."

"Do that after supper," she urged.

"Oh, all right," he surrendered; "only I hate to set down at a woman's table dressed so rough."

"My dear boy," reproved Mrs. Hemington, "it isn't your clothes I like; it's you."

Before he could reply she arose and bustled into the kitchen, from which mysterious sanctum divers appetizing odors soon issued.

The twins strove to entertain the triplets to the best of their ability, displaying the family album over which the three auburn heads bent in close proximity to the dark tresses of the girls.

The inspection of the album was interrupted by the mother calling from the kitchen—

"Come, girls, and set the table."

The twins excused themselves prettily, and departed to assist their mother.

The three became suddenly ill at ease. It is next to an impossibility for a cowpuncher to content himself in a room where

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he is supposed to be on his good behavior. Cigarettes were barred. If they talked, one of them might inadvertently unleash an expression that would shame him for the rest of his life. They sat gingerly upon the chairs and fidgeted.

Mrs. Hemington, immaculate in a crackling white apron, came to the sitting-room door.

"Want to wash, boys?"

The three gladly responded to her suggestion, for the tension had become almost unbearable.

They filed into the kitchen, their high heels clumping on the bare floor. One of the twins filled a basin with water, and Jack, after removing his leather cuffs, went into action. Teasingly he flirted a little water into Ruby's face, and there followed a scuffle in which Pearl joined. There was much laughter, and Jack found the buxom girls more than his match.

"Help!" he bleated piteously. "They're a-killin' me."

"Here! Here!" admonished the mother.

She reached in and rescued Jack from the clutches of the girls.

The eldest Jetts grinned foolishly at his brothers. The faces of Jeb and Joe held the rapt expression of men who are looking straight into Paradise. Heretofore Jack had always remained coldly aloof from all affairs wherein his brothers displayed what he termed "girlitis." Now, he was "makin' hisself right to home."

Their splatterings and splutterings finished, hair combed, with exactly the right sort of curl to the forelocks, the three sank into their appointed places at the table.

"Now pitch right in," invited Mrs. Hemington. "Pearlie, pass the bread."

The conversation waned. The Jetts brothers were earnest trenchermen who believed that the proper thing to do at a loaded table was to "lean to the vittles."

After many compliments regarding the supper, the cowboys filed out on the porch.

"We'll be back at eight-thirty," Jack told the women. Then to his brothers— "Come on; time's flyin', and we want to look civilized at the hoe-down."

A block from the Hemington house Jack delivered an opinion freighted with unmistakable enthusiasm.

"I tell you, boys, that widder and her girls are jes' a little bit the finest folks in this country. As I think of it, the way we acted on hittin' town, I'm ashamed as a dog. Think of us, common drunkards, throwin' our feet under that good, kind woman's table! We jes' simply got to cut out the snake-juice and brace up and be decent. No more drinkin' goes."

Jeb brought forth a cunning little plan.

"I'm with you, Jack, but I don't think it will do no harm to take, say, a couple of horns apiece before we go to the dance. Seems though I never kin con-trol my feet the way I want till I've got my head charged."

"Yes," seconded Joe. "Jes' one, or say, two or three little drinks before we bust into that shindig. But we ought to git slicked up before we do anything."

His mind turning from the tonsorial to the financial, Joe halted, drew forth his money and carefully counted it. Jack and Jeb followed suit.

"By the looks of our coin we can't take over three drinks anyway," said Jack. "By the time we gits some new henskins, pay barber-bill, hotel and hoss-feed, and have money to spend on the girls, we won't have enough left to lift the mortgage on a cigarette. We sure scattered some coin this afternoon. Still we might take three drinks. It will be more like a medicine than anything else."

"Three and no more," droned Jeb.

"Three and no more," echoed Joe.

THEY turned into Main Street and swaggered into a barber-shop.

Just why a cow-puncher will loaf and dawdle for hours, and then enter a barber-shop and proclaim that he will immediately perish unless shaved on the run, is a range mystery that has never been solved.

Prior to their entrance into the shop the triplets had been in no panting hurry. But as soon as they entered that little two-chair establishment they began counting the precious minutes, and to make various biting remarks concerning individuals who had "the cast-iron gall to git a hair-cut on a night like this."

Apparently their remarks were addressed to a town dandy stretched out in the first chair. It would seem that the town Beau Brummel had just informed the barber that he desired everything on the tonsorial program. That large order annoyed the triplets.

"It jes' seems," complained Jeb, as he

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pawed over some old papers on a little stand, "it jes' seems that some folks are natural hogs. I've seen men crawl into a barber-chair, with folks waitin' nine deep, and take everything the barber could give 'em—everything except a jolt in the jaw which such hogs sure has comin'. Jes' because a man is in a chair is no sign he is to make it his home. If a feller wants a bed fer the night let him go to the hotel—or the livery stable."

"You have certainly stated a fact," agreed Jack, flinging a look of deathless hate at the belathered dandy. "Take these people raised in a barn, with no one to teach 'em manners, and they sure show it when they git out among folks. Got no more manners than a prairie-dog."

"And there's nothin' you kin say," regretted Joe. "If they had some scrap to 'em, a man could step back and unhitch on 'em. Place to land on them gobblers is right under the ear; that will make them throw their feet over their head."

The first-chair victim suddenly reared up and turned a lathered face on his tormentors.

"If you don't like my style," he bleated, blowing lather and tugging at the towel tucked in his collar-band, "if you don't like my style, you know what you can do."

Jack arose swiftly and pushed aside the barber.

"There's jes' a little bit too much noise here," he snarled, and snatched up a razor. "Lay down there, you!" he bawled at the belathered one. "Or I'll gash you from ear to ear."

The dandy fell back in the chair, his eyes rolling with terror. Men, he recalled, had gone suddenly insane and committed frightful crimes. He would humor this one; he would lie *perfectly* quiet.

The barber started to interfere with Jack's operations but found himself in the iron grips of Jeb and Joe.

"Don't rattle me," requested Jack calmly, as he deftly stropped the razor and then tried the edge. "I'll have this pig scraped in less than three shakes of a lamb's tail. Lay quiet, my little pet."

Then in an aside to Jeb:

"No; you don't need to git a bucket fer him to bleed in. I never cut very deep."

The form in the chair shuddered. With a final flourish, Jack finished stropping the razor and began his cruel work. He seized the nose of his victim as a man seizes the small end of one of those old-fashioned gourds and began scraping.

There was really no danger, as Jack was an old hand with the razor; but the dandy believed that each scrape was merely the prelude to a sickening death.

The cowboy worked steadily and gravely, his brothers looking on with the solemnity of church elders. Now and then he would wipe the razor on the victim's hair, or lather his face with the deft touch of a blacksmith shoeing a horse.

"It jes' seems," he remarked in easy conversational tones, "that if I hadn't took to cow-punchin' I'd been a barber. I got that light touch. Notice the light touch, boys. Jes' missed his ear, but gathered the hay. How's she cuttin', dearest? Oh, fine! Thought so. Now raise your chinnie; papa won't hurt you. Still, boys, this is ticklish business around the neck. When I'm shavin' a pig's neck, I always has a strong desire to split his Adam's apple jes' to hear him squeal. There now, sweetheart, that's done."

The amateur barber flung down the razor and began reaching for bottles. Said he to the victim—

"You said that you wanted 'everything' and you're goin' to git it, my proud beauty."

Oil, tonic, water, powder—everything in the line of supplies—rained and sifted down upon the spluttering wretch. Then Jack seized a towel and rubbed the sufferer's features till he groaned in agony.

At last the cowboy stood back and proudly surveyed his handiwork.

"Did I understand you to say that you wanted anything further?" he sweetly asked.

"No, no, no!" screamed the victim, giving a spasmodic flop that landed him near the door.

Scrambling to his feet, he fled with weird cries into the street.

Jeb looked at Jack solemnly.

"As near as I kin gather," said brother Jeb, his face utterly expressionless, "that gobbler is on his way. He may not know where he's goin' but he's certainly on his way."

"You have stated a great trooth," agreed Jack as he seated himself in the first chair. "But what gits me is, he never even said, 'Thank you.' "

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CHAPTER II

Never lie to a girl who's soft yet strong,
Who gives you straight, fair looks;
Who knows a horse, likewise a man,
And some things not writ in books.
—*Cowboy Lyric.*

DRED MUNFORD and the Superintendent of the Z O Y Cattle Company sat in the former's cabin, a bottle of whisky between them, discussing the removal of the Half Moon cattle outfit, whether by force or intimidation, from the Half Moon buttes.

"You've monkeyed long enough!" snapped the Superintendent, a little wiry man with a faded mustache and eyes like bits of driftwood.

"You want the world!" snarled Munford. "MacElvar is out of the way; what more do you want?"

"I want them Half Moon cattle off this range," replied the little man coldly. "And I expect you to move 'em. You ought to be able to handle a girl. Git her out. You've got others out, and you kin get her out. I'm goin' to throw our cattle in here this Winter anyhow. It's up to you, Munford. What have you done so far?"

"Got her riders on the run. They're ready to quit right now. They're beginnin' to see this ain't a healthy country. She's about ready to quit."

Then, as if the idea had just occurred to him he casually questioned—

"How would it be to offer to buy her out?"

The Superintendent arose and tightened his belt.

"The Z O Y don't buy any of these nesters out," he returned grimly. "You ain't tryin' to give us the double cross, be you?"

He gave Munford a sharp glance.

"Don't try any of that sort of work, Dred; it won't go with me."

Munford felt his gorge rise at the Superintendent's tone. The killer had been loyal to the interests of the big cattle outfit and felt that the little Superintendent should have more consideration for past services. If the Superintendent was suspicious and distrustful, he would give him something to be suspicious and distrustful about.

No, he would not break with the Z O Y, but he would not go to the lengths with the girl that was expected by the Superintendent. The little man expected him to burn her haystacks, kill her cattle, and intimidate her riders until she would be glad to give up the fight. He would intimidate her riders, but he would not destroy her property nor injure her.

The killer owned a secret desire to possess Tana MacElvar and the Half Moon ranch. When her father had been drowned, he and Herring, an old nester, had brought the body to the Half Moon ranch. He had given the girl to understand that he had made every attempt to save her father. That, he believed, had raised him many points in her regard. In time she would grow to rely on him. When the right moment arrived he would propose marriage to her. When she was his wife he would turn on the Z O Y.

While the Superintendent surmised a great deal, he had no positive knowledge of the deadly work of the man carried on his secret pay-roll as a professional killer. But until Tana MacElvar was his wife, and Munford thought that time was only a matter of a few weeks, he would still pose as a small rancher and Half Moon neighbor, the while he drew his pay from the Z O Y.

"Give me till Spring," requested Munford finally. "I'll git her out by that time."

"I won't say nothin' about time," the Superintendent flung back over his shoulder. "Git to work and do something now."

"Have another drink?" invited Munford softly, and caressing his blue jaws thoughtfully.

"No," came the abrupt reply. "Got to be movin'."

The Superintendent opened the cabin door and strode out to his buckboard. Munford followed with a quick side glance at the saddle-gun on the wall. It would be an easy matter to snatch down the rifle and drop the disagreeable little man in his tracks. Yet he restrained the murderous impulse and casually remarked—

"Looks like rain."

The Superintendent gathered up the lines.

"Git to work now!" he reminded Munford.

Then he turned his team and drove away.

"I ought to have downed the little coyote while I had a chance," muttered the killer, as he returned to his whisky-bottle. "Spoke to me like he would a dog. Thinks he kin bulldoze me. I'll go to work *now* all right; go to work in a way he don't figger on."

He sat for some time brooding, now and

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then helping himself to the whisky. Finally he arose, buckled on his six-shooter, took down the saddle-gun from its pegs, and sought his ramshackle stable. There he saddled his best horse, the while he muttered—

"I'll show the little coyote a thing or two."

HE FOUND Tana MacElvar seated upon the south porch of the Half Moon ranch-house playing with Don, a huge wolfhound, and head of the pack she kept to lessen the depredations of marauding wolves and coyotes.

Tana greeted her visitor in friendly fashion and nodded to a convenient chair. Her heart was yet warm with gratitude over Munford's attempted rescue of her father.

"It is cool here," he observed, although his swart face displayed no sign of his hot ride across the buttes, nor of the liquor he had consumed.

"Yes," she agreed pleasantly. Sadly she added, "Papa always enjoyed sitting out here evenings."

Munford shivered slightly and the pupils of his dark eyes began alternately expanding and contracting. He shook off the chill caused by the mention of her father's habit and contemplated her rich, warm beauty. To his sluggish mind she was a bundle of contradictions. Soft and apparently feminine from the crown of her dark head to her dainty feet, she was, he had good reasons to know, possessed of a cool, positive mind and an unflinching courage.

"I have been thinkin'," he began awkwardly, "that this here must be a lonesome life fer a woman."

The girl laughed lightly.

"Oh, no," she quickly returned. "I am seldom alone, and am too busy to become lonesome. Of course, since father was drowned, I have missed him more than I can tell."

Again Munford shivered.

"Still," he managed to insist, "it would be better if——"

She flashed him a keen glance of comprehension. Her woman's intuition told her what was coming. She resolved to use her wit to prevent a declaration of love she could not return and did not desire.

"Won't you have some lemonade? I'll get it for you."

Ere he could reply she had whirled into the house.

As the screen-door closed behind her, Munford glanced about him with the air of a watchful rattlesnake. Don the hound arose, gave the man a hostile glance, and with hackles slightly lifted took a majestic departure.

At that moment a fat rider came around the corner of the house, seeking the mistress of the Half Moon. He looked up to meet Munford's deadly stare.

For a time "Fat Charlie" inspected the menacing figure on the porch. The cowboy was about to inform the woman who signed his pay-checks that he and his two compatriots had decided to quit her service. Several bullets had whined over Charlie's head during his stay on the Half Moon range; and, while he had caught no glimpse of the mysterious sharpshooter, he vaguely suspected Munford. The other riders had had similar experiences.

A little latent manhood stirred within the breast of the fat cowboy.

"You're in poor business here, Munford," he dragged out, noting that the killer had left his guns hanging on his saddle-horn.

Munford arose, his eyes ablaze.

"Keep off my trail," he hissed with chilling sibilancy, "and you'll live longer."

Charlie backed slowly away. He would serve notice on Miss Mac later. He was not hired to fight.

Munford resumed his seat, his lips curling back over his teeth, the wavy lines in his forehead deepening.

Tana, burdened with a pitcher of lemonade and glasses, and accompanied by her mother, appeared in the doorway. With awkward politeness Munford arose and opened the screen-door. The girl poured a glass of lemonade while her mother offered neighborly greetings.

"I'll take the pitcher and glasses," offered the mother, who had stood in the doorway and fanned flies while Munford gulped down two glasses of the lemonade.

The girl attempted to catch her mother's eye, but, rather slow to comprehend, Mrs. MacElvar failed to note the slight shake of her daughter's head, and returned to the kitchen.

"I am sorry I have no cigars to offer you," apologized the girl as she dropped into a rocker. "I must get some when I go to town."

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"Thanks," returned Munford. "If you don't mind, I'll roll a cigarette."

He plucked the inevitable book of cigarette-papers from his vest pocket but awkwardly dropped it. Involuntarily she bent over to pick up the tiny book.

"Never mind," he muttered; "I'll git it."

But it was too late. Their hands touched and he seized her wrist with the animal-like avidity that marked any movement of his bespeaking desire of possession.

She arose, and he with her, still grasping her wrist.

"Listen to me," he cried domineeringly.

She looked into his eyes coolly and without fear. No man had ever sought to dominate her. She could feel the first surge of a cold and deadly rage welling up within her.

Slowly he drew her toward him. With gray eyes aflame with cold fire she drew back her free hand and slapped him full in the mouth. But the blow seemed only to please him. With a malevolent grin he drew her closer, twisted her head upon his shoulder, and would have kissed her had not a trembling, squawking voice to his rear told him that death was plucking at his sleeve.

Swiftly he released her and whirled to confront a bent, weazen-faced old man in faded overalls and run-over boots, and in whose trembling hand rocked an old-fashioned cap-and-ball pistol.

"Herring!" exclaimed the killer in a hoarse whisper.

Munford's glowing eyes clutched and held the gaze of the intruder. The old man seemed to wither and shrivel under the burning gaze. Yet the pistol still rocked in his hand, and he managed feebly to squawk—

"Leave her be—leave her be!"

The girl, white-faced but still enraged, edged toward the door. She had been insulted on her own ground; she would secure a weapon—— Yet, as her hand touched the screen-door, she halted, fascinated by Munford's movements.

Slowly and with infinite caution the killer approached the trembling Herring.

"Drop that gun," he ordered softly. "Drop it, drop it," he reiterated; and then with a sudden, intense and dominating note, "*Drop it!*"

The old pistol fell from Herring's fingers as if dashed to the ground by an invisible hand.

Then Munford leaped and struck—struck the cringing old man a blow that lifted him from his feet and hurled him, a tangle of arms and legs, into a clump of rose-bushes, where he lay supine.

The girl gasped and with a tremendous effort flung open the screen-door. A moment later she returned to the porch, a heavy revolver in her hand, and her lovely face that of a fury.

But Munford had departed.

A REVULSION of feeling swept over her; weak and trembling, she dropped the revolver into a chair as if the weapon were some odious animate thing. Then, gathering her strength, she sought the little man, who was making feeble efforts to gain his feet.

When she had half-carried him to a chair he began whining weakly—

"Jes' come over to borrow a little coffee."

A sudden thought pierced his mental fog and he clutched her arm tremulously.

"Don't say nothin' about this, Miss Mac," he weakly begged. "Ferget it, Miss Mac, ferget it—please."

She flashed a puzzled glance at the old nester.

"Very well," she assured him, "I will do as you ask. Rest there a moment."

She gave a little feminine shudder as she noted his bruised and bleeding mouth.

"I'll get some water and a cloth."

In a moment she had returned to assume the rôle of nurse to the quavering Herring. Mrs. MacElvar and the wondering housekeeper peered curiously over Tana's shoulder as she bathed the battered mouth of the old man.

"Got sunstruck, Mis' MacElvar," whined Herring; "fell down."

Tana did not offer to dispute the old man's words, and presently Mrs. MacElvar and the housekeeper returned to the kitchen.

Gratefully the old man permitted the girl to wipe the blood from his lips and chin. He looked up at her with humble and pathetic eyes.

"You're too kind to me," he quavered.

She made a deprecatory gesture.

"Indeed I am not too kind," she murmured, sweet sympathy in her voice and manner. "You have always been a good neighbor to me."

Herring winced as from a sudden knife-thrust and muttered—

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"A good neighbor—a good neighbor!"

"Now," she told him cheerfully, as she finished bathing his bruises, "you're as good as new."

"Then I'd best be goin'."

"Better stay and rest a while," she suggested.

"No, thank you." he declined. "If you'll let me have a mite of coffee, I'll be goin'." Again he clutched her arm. "You won't—promise me you won't—say nothin' about what's happened."

His faded eyes were full of sheeplike fear.

"Why, certainly," she replied soothingly. "I will forget I ever knew that dog Munford."

"Yes, yes!" he squawked. "Ferget—ferget!"

When she had secured the coffee and gave it to him, he looked at her as if about to speak, but only gasped weakly. He turned and painfully negotiated the steps. He walked with a peculiar dragging shuffle, as if fearful of stepping on the heels of some invisible associate.

As he turned the corner of the house he muttered—

"Thank you—thank you."

Then Fat Charlie came to inform the mistress of the Half Moon that he and his two assistants had concluded to quit her service.

"Why, Charlie!" expostulated the girl. "Why are you leaving me this way? Surely the work is easy, and we set a good table."

Charlie looked down at the ground and wriggled uneasily.

"We're goin' to quit anyway," he said doggedly. "No kick, Miss Mac; jes' want to move on."

With a sudden change of manner she came down the steps and squarely confronted him.

"Your checks are ready for you," she told him sharply. "And you can't get off the place any too quick to suit me. Some day I hope to have some real men on this ranch."

Charlie beat a precipitate retreat. The girl, sorely troubled, returned to the porch.

"Oh," she confided to Don, who had returned from some secret foray, "I wish I were a man!"

Her mother came to the door.

"Mother," she quietly informed her, "the riders have served notice of quitting. I am going to Yellowstone in the morning and return with new riders. You can give them their checks. And," she added, clenching her hands slightly, "I will find some real men, or know the reason why!"

CHAPTER III

Come a-runnin'
  We ain't done yet;
One more couple
  To fill this set.

Professor, let
  Your music fall;
S'loot your pardners,
  And ba-a-a-lance all!
—*Cowboy Lyric.*

CAME the purple twilight, the booming of night-hawks, and a cool breeze that stirred the cottonwoods to grateful whispers. There was a desultory popping of firecrackers and the occasional bang of some six-shooter that had escaped the watchful eyes of the officers. But the high tide of Yellowstone patriotism had receded, to come roaring in with gathered force and momentum on the morrow—the Fourth.

The town was comparatively quiet. Supper, and preparation for the big dance which would continue until the morning of the Fourth, held the attention of the crowd that had surged up and down Main Street the whole hot, blissful Third.

However, the Fourth would not see the end of the celebration. Many eager celebrants, not entirely stripped of funds, would carry their noisy activities over to the night of the Fifth, and possibly the Sixth, moving in alcoholic circles, unconcerned as to clocks or calendars, believing that the Fourth was an elastic day whose stretching qualities were limited only to the amount of ready money on hand.

Supper-time found the dining-room of the Yellowstone Hotel jammed to its fullest capacity. The serving-force, augmented by several extra girls, beribboned and perfumed, dealt "side dishes" to the hungry guests as expert gamblers deal cards. In the hall a ravenous horde patiently waited until the envied occupants of the tables noted that there was nothing more to eat except the condiments in the tarnished castors, and regretfully pushed back their chairs.

The restaurants were full to overflowing, and men stood three deep in front of the saloon lunch-counters.

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Sam, the negro cook, whose Hamburger stronghold Jack Jetts had so recklessly stormed, was, as a waiting cow-puncher expressed it, "as busy as bird-dog on a flea-farm."

The Jetts brothers were not in evidence among the hungry horde. They were standing in front of the barber-shop, shaved to a whisper and drenched with hair-oil.

"Now fer some new duds," announced Jack. "What say, boys?"

Jeb and Joe readily agreed to the proposed sartorial improvements; and the three sought a store, where they purchased dancing-pumps — "henskins" — white silk shirts, silk handkerchiefs, and gawdy sleeve-holders.

"Now, boys," proposed Jack, "let's go down to the stable and spruce up. 'Spect we'll have to sleep in a stall anyway, and we might as well leave our old stuff down there. Come on; we don't want to keep the girls waitin.' "

"Lead the way, old sorrel-top," cried Jeb cheerfully. "You kin gamble when we git this stuff on somebody's goin' to have to wear specs or go blind as a bat."

They filed out of the store and, three abreast, made their way to the stable. In lieu of a dressing-room they took possession of the harness and saddle-room, and presently stood forth arrayed for the dance.

Cigarettes rolled and lighted, they lounged for a few moments against the wall of the stable office.

Jack, with pardonable pride, contemplated his trim feet encased in shining new dancing-pumps.

"Them henskins," he drawled, "fit like they was growed on. Good stuff in 'em, too; heard a feller say they last forever and then turn to a grindstone." Then, lazily, "Hadn't we better be a-driftin' up toward our happy home? Mother will be a-waitin'."

Jeb and Joe tittered. That "mother will be a-waitin' " was too much for those humorists.

Jack frowned at the smirking, giggling twain.

"Mrs. Hemington is a dear, kind lady," he said with owl-like solemnity.

Still Jeb and Joe tittered. They choked on cigarette-smoke, slapped each other's backs, and gurgled—

"*Mother* will be a-waitin' fer us."

"Oh, shut up!" snapped the eldest brother. "You act like you'd swallered a squealin' worm."

After a time the two subsided, grinning fearfully. Jack turned his attention to further enhancement of their personal charms.

"I suppose," he thoughtfully suggested, "we ought to git some perfume. We ain't never been to a dance 'thout perfumin' up. Vi'let, say, or attar of roses."

"Yes, indeedy," agreed Jeb. "When we go swingin' 'em down the center we ought to be perfumed up."

"A man in the presence of ladies," declared Joe emphatically, "ought always be perfumed up. It shows his grade, and a ree-fined mind."

"You have sure said something that trip," complimented Jeb; and then fell to admiring brother Jack, a procedure in which Joe silently joined.

Their admiration of Jack was not untouched of vanity, for in the bell-bottomed, wide-checked trousers, the trim dancing-pumps, the flaunting handkerchief, the silk shirt and open vest, and the graceful, lounging wearer of those articles, each beheld as perfect an image of himself as he would find in a mirror.

Pinching out and discarding their cigarette stubs, the three strolled up the street and sauntered into a drug-store where they invested heavily in perfume, after sniffing a number of brands.

The ancient ceremony of "perfumin' up" was conducted in the alley in the rear of the drug-store; and, when concluded, the triplets might be scented from afar as one would scent a breath from Cathay.

As they left the alley Jack debated dubiously:

"I don't know but what we slapped on too much of that smell-'em-good. There's such a thing as smellin' too sweet, the same as actin' too good."

"What's the odds?" scoffed Jeb. "If any of these town fillies don't like my perfumery, she kin drag her rope elsewhere. I'm some independent, *me!* If I had a tub of the stuff I'd wash in it; I sure love it."

"We might take one little drink," suddenly suggested Joe, feeling out the general sentiment.

His suggestion met with Jack's quick disapproval.

"Joe, you ain't no more will-power than a angleworm. Ferget it!"

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"I was jes' a-joshin'," Joe laughed, but his mirth lacked the right ring; it sounded just a little hollow.

"Well, you needn't josh any more. No man what is goin' to break out in high society kin afford to come in steppin' on his own feet."

The eldest Jetts paused and seemed to be lost in thought.

"Still," he went on, as one who favors reform but does not desire to be harsh, "we might take one little sniff of the oil of gladness. It'll be, as I've hearn stated, more like a medicine—but only one, friends and brothers, only one."

"That bein' the case," laughed Jeb, "let's be tippin' said lone load into us and then trot up and git the girls—" he tittered softly—"and mother."

The three sought the Round-up saloon, drank solemnly, turned down their glasses as a sign of their resolution, and filed out in impressive silence.

They found Mrs. Hemington and her daughters, arrayed in white dresses, on the front porch, where they had been for some time awaiting the arrival of their escorts.

"Land sakes!" exclaimed the widow with a sniff. "What you boys been doing—robbing a drug-store?"

The burning blushes of the three were hidden in the gathering dusk.

Jack was the first to recover.

"Everybody ready?" he asked, clearing his throat slightly.

"We certainly be," replied Mrs. Hemington.

THE mother, with a daughter on each arm, headed the little procession wending its way to the dance. The triplets formed a decorous rear-guard. As the little party entered the dancing-pavilion, a brass-voiced caller began sprinkling wax on the rough pine flooring, and bidding all within hearing—

"Joose yer pardners—kerdrill!"

Jeb and Joe immediately turned to the twins and joined the set just forming. Jack, with a flourish, bowed to the widow, voicing the old cowland query—

"May I have your comp'ny fer this dance?"

"With pleasure," she replied, nodding across the pavilion to Sheriff Morrow, whom rumor credited with having a bland eye for good-looking widows. She took Jack's arm and they sailed into the set.

The set all formed, the caller shouted to the violinist, "Let her go, perfesser!" and the dance was on.

The dancing of the triplets partook of neither slow dignity nor bobbing uncertainty. Limber, light-footed, and as certain as well balanced guns, they danced with utter abandonment, shouting with the caller his weird rigmarole, yet never missing a step.

Now Jack, prior to the swinging of the lady on the opposite corner, performs a series of difficult steps that thrill his brothers with bursting pride. It was as Jeb said—

"Old Jack is the boy fer the fancy touches."

Advancing to his partner at a turkey-trot, the eldest Jetts swings the buxom maiden till her starched skirts snap, and then backs, jigging and shuffling, to his place. Then Jeb performs a break-down that calls forth the noisy plaudits of his set. Joe, not to be outdone, breaks into a pattering dance, each step as light as a wind-blown leaf, and then leaps in the air to descend in time with the last expiring plunk of the banjo, and the caller's bellow of "Prom'nade all; you know where."

Perspiring freely, but with no thought of missing a dance, the triplets escorted their partners to seats; and bowing, murmured—

"I thank you fer your kindness."

"I swan!" ejaculated Mrs. Hemington, as she fanned her face with a handkerchief snatched from one of her daughters. "If there ain't Tana MacElvar! Poor child, she lost her father——"

"Huh?" muttered Jack. "The girl of the Half Moon!"

He turned to look at the daughter of the man he had met several times on round-up—the silent MacElvar.

The young woman arose and came toward them.

"She's coming over," laughed Mrs. Hemington. "I want you boys to meet her. She's one of the nicest, smartest girls in the country."

Lowering her voice, she added for their information—

"I don't suppose she's dancing; her father hasn't been dead a year."

Tana greeted Mrs. Hemington cordially and smiled at her exuberant embrace.

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After the widow had exhausted her stock of admiring exclamations she presented the triplets.

"I remember you boys," Tana told them sweetly. "You were at our ranch once."

She shook their hands man-fashion.

"That's right; we was at your ranch," said Jack, attempting to make conversation.

He was conscious of a sudden feeling of emptiness in his chest.

"Dancing?" queried Mrs. Hemington gently.

The girl's answer was in accordance with the belief of her hard-headed, practical father.

"Yes; why shouldn't I? Papa always wanted me to have a good time. To dance will not cause me to forget."

Jack was not slow to take advantage of Tana's views regarding ostentatious mourning.

"May I have this waltz?" he asked a little eagerly.

She nodded graciously. But ere they could glide away, the widow had seized Tana's arm.

"Where are you stopping, Tana?"

"I really do not know, Mrs. Hemington. The hotel is full, and——"

"You will go home with me," decided Mrs. Hemington.

She laughed and pushed the girl into Jack's arms.

Then, with a "Land sakes! You here?" she confronted Sheriff Morrow. The officer reached out his bearlike arms, the widow coyly glided into the protecting circle, and they whirled into the dance. The twins were already dancing, and Jeb and Joe had secured partners.

JACK was smitten with an unusual silence. He searched the barrens of his mind for something to say, but all he could find was—

"So you're the Half Moon girl?"

"Yes," she sighed.

The cowboy marveled at her dancing. She was slim, but, he thought, not too slim. Her hand was smooth yet strong. She leaned lightly against his arm, following every step, drifting, gliding, turning with easy grace. He suddenly felt boyish and mentally deficient. He felt that she had appraised him and found him wanting in many things. Yet he wished that the waltz might continue forever.

Who, having once swayed to the magic strains of a cowland orchestra, can ever forget?

The violinist, lost in some fine ecstasy, closed his eyes and rambled through Elysian fields. His face in the flaring light took on the bland, innocent expression of a sleeping babe's. The cornetist, strengthened by a fiery gulp from a bottle hidden under the platform, blared forth rich, mellow notes that breathed of running streams, golden moonlight, love, and distant laughter. And the banjo-player, mouth open and eyes rolling heavenward, oom-blung-blinged his way into a special little Paradise of his own construction.

As Jack escorted Tana to her seat he was conscious of an awful dread—perhaps he would not know the bliss of another waltz with her. Yet being a Jetts he would determine his fate.

"May I have the second waltz from this one?" he breathed, as one who craves a matchless boon.

For a moment her gray eyes studied his earnest face, and then she nodded.

Jack Jetts was not in the habit of talking to himself, for he considered such the pet weakness of sheep-herders; but, nevertheless, as he skated across the pavilion in search of a partner for the next dance, he said to himself, "Great Lord, what a girl—what a girl!"

He had reference to the gray-eyed, lissome Tana MacElvar.

It was as they turned in the second waltz that Tana told Jack of the difficulty she had experienced in holding men on the Half Moon ranch.

"You must have drew a lot of scrubs," commiserated Jack. "I happen to know three riders that wouldn't quit you in a thousand years."

"And who are they?" she innocently inquired.

"Their name is Jetts," he returned, swinging her clear of a madly racing couple.

"Well, then, as you have suggested it, I feel free to ask if you and your brothers will go to work for me?"

"We will," Jack replied earnestly. "We was intendin' to lay off fer a month or two, but we'll go to work fer you when you say. Jeb and Joe will do as I say."

"Of course you realize what confronts men who work for small outfits? You know the Half Moon is considered a nester outfit

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I do not know just all the ins and outs of the trail, but I know that men who work for me must be men who will stay under all conditions."

"Yes, Miss Mac," Jack assured her. "I understand the lay-out from start to finish. We'll take your outfit, and you won't have to worry about nothin.' The Jettsus always throw in their fightin' free on a job. In your case we'll go the limit."

"But your brothers?"

"Miss Mac, them brothers of mine do as I say when it comes to hirin' or quittin'. Consider the Jettsus as your men. When do you want to start fer the ranch?"

"In the morning," she told him.

The music had ceased and they slowly walked back to the Hemington group.

"I'll be at Mrs. Hemington's. You can bring the buckboard up there any time between seven and ten. I regret having you miss the Fourth, but I must get back to the ranch."

Jack beckoned his brothers, and they came up eagerly. "We pull our freight fer the Half Moon in the mornin'."

Jeb and Joe regarded brother Jack for a quizzical moment, and then Jeb remarked:

"Jack, if I was goin' to give you a middle name, I'd make it 'Sudden.' But it goes with me. I'm ready any time."

"Same here," agreed Joe. "What old Jack says goes with me."

Then Jack drew his brothers aside.

"Boys, I took the job fer one reason. The girl is gittin' the worst of it."

"No need to go further, friend and brother," said Jeb. "I've heard enough to know that a job on the Half Moon means keepin' your eye peeled fer trouble. Count me in strong."

"No girl like Miss Mac," Joe declared, "kin git the worst of it while the Jettsus are up on their feet. Old Jack has did the proper thing. I'd hire to her with my eyes shut."

Jack gave his brothers an affectionate glance.

"All I got to say—" and his voice was very gentle—"is that if ever a man had a pair of brothers to tie to, and know they're there all the time, I'm the lucky gobbler. By jinks, there's the music! Fog to it, boys!"

WHEN Mrs. Hemington ascertained that Tana had secured the services of the Jetts brothers, she made rapturous comment.

"You are certainly lucky, Tana. The Jetts boys are the best cow-punchers in the country, and just as loyal as the day is long. You will have no trouble with them unless——"

A note of regret crept into her voice.

"They drink, and are a little wild at times."

Tana's reply was to beckon to Jack, who had just concluded a dance with a beribboned waitress of the Yellowstone Hotel. He came over quickly.

"Jack," said the mistress of the Half Moon in a low voice, "there is one thing I forgot to mention. I am not particular nor finicky, but it would please me very much if you boys would not—— Well, you know that liquor is not good for you."

For a moment Jack regarded her sorrowfully, and then reached out his hand.

"It's time we cut out the drinkin' entirely, and we'll do it now. Is that satisfactory, Miss Mac?"

"Your word is good with me, Jack," she murmured. "But please do not think me a finicky, fussy woman. I want you to feel that working for me is no hardship."

"Whatever you say goes," he assured her. "I'm glad you mentioned it. It will fix us so we will have to be good, and that's what we need. It's all settled; no drinkin'."

"Thank you, Jack." And her gray eyes shone gratefully.

As Jack sought his brothers, he again fell a victim to the sheep-herder's habit of talking to himself.

"Called me Jack right off the handle. Nothin' stuck up 'bout that girl. She's all right. Called me Jack."

To his brothers he delivered an emphatic proclamation.

"Boys, Miss Mac says drinkin' don't go, and that does settle the cat-hop. I don't want to hear a yip out of nary one of you. You've taken your last sniff of joy-juice."

Jeb and Joe nodded in silent acquiescence to his dictum; and then, as the music started, the fraternal triangle separated into its component parts and scattered to mingle in the dance.

AN HOUR after midnight Mrs. Hemington gathered her daughters and Tana under her wing and announced that it was time to go home. Jack gulped back a keen regret, for Tana had promised him the next waltz.

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Jeb and Joe walked ahead with the twins, Jack followed with Tana, and Mrs. Hemington, talking a streak, loitered some distance in the rear on the arm of Sheriff Morrow.

The gallant Sheriff, while not considered the widow's "steady comp'ny," was generally in her vicinity when the occasion would permit.

Presently the widow's chatter ceased and one of her daughters observed—

"I wonder what makes mama so still."

"That's a sign somebody is makin' love," declared Joe.

"Yep," laughed Jeb. "Got to watch them old boys like Hank Morrow. He'll be stealin' your maw first thing you know."

"I don't care," said Pearl. "Mr. Morrow is a nice man, ain't he, Ruby?"

"I should say he is!" her sister exclaimed sweetly. "He's so good to us all!"

Jack was not talking, and the girl at his side, inheriting some of her father's taciturnity, had little to say. She sensed a great gulf between herself and the cowboy. He considered himself her man now, hired to do her bidding. She knew that he would never bridge the gulf of his own accord.

Ruby called back—

"What's the matter, Jack; the cat got your tongue?"

His reply was cowboyish.

"When there's nothin' to say, what's the use to say it?"

At the gate the Sheriff, in spite of the widow's hospitable urgings, declined to linger.

"Got to be gittin' downtown," he told the party, "and see how things are movin'. See you all later. By-by, folks."

Yet, when the officer shook hands with the widow, he tenderly squeezed her fingers. And as he swung down the street he found himself whistling boyishly.

The widow blessed the darkness, since her daughters could not see the pensive light in her eyes. She threw off the spell of the Sheriff's warm handclasp and bustled into the house.

"I'll rustle up some coffee and sandwiches," she cried cheerily. "'Twon't be much, but 'twill stay you till morning."

Following the refreshments Jack was the first to realize that the women were in need of sleep.

"Come on, boys," he ordered. "It's time to be a-goin'."

Jeb and Joe regretfully obeyed Jack's order, for they were cozily settled with the twins, holding hands under cover of the darkness.

"Good-by," called back the three, as they swung through the gate. "Good-by till tomorrow."

"Be sure and go right to bed," admonished Mrs. Hemington maternally.

"All right!" shouted Jack with sudden daring. "All right, *mother!*"

Jeb and Joe giggled.

"Too bad," sighed the widow, "that they haven't a real mother's care; they're such good-hearted rascals!"

"Yes, indeed," agreed Tana almost happily. "They are the kind of men I have been looking for."

CHAPTER IV

The man who talks but nothin' does—
Fer friendship straight and true,
Don't count a-tall beside the boy
Who'll shed his blood fer you.
—*Cowboy Lyric.*

AS THE three turned into Main Street Jack remarked, apropos of nothing in particular—

"This is sure a queer life."

Jeb and Joe made no comment, for their triplet intuition noted some subtle change in Jack. They could not define that change in just so many words, but they knew that brother Jack had entered a realm into which they might not follow. They drew close to him as if to comfort him.

The lights still flared in the Round-up saloon, and the click and whir of the roulette-ball still tempted the reckless. The triplets entered the saloon quietly—so quietly that an exuberant range friend, who was making joyous trips between the wheel and the bar, gaped at them in astonishment.

He had been having what was known as "drunkard's luck." Apparently he could not lose. His system was to scatter his chips over the numbers as a farmer's wife scatters corn for chickens; and then, on winning, to scrape his wealth into his hat and gallop to the bar.

"Everybody have something on me!" he bawled.

But he found not the usual ready response from the Jetts brothers. They regarded him with an odd aloofness, and he promptly forgot all about them.

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"I'm as dry as a burnt boot," complained Jeb. "What is it, Jack?"

"Lemonade," came the succinct reply.

Jack turned to the bartender and briefly ordered three lemonades.

The bartender made no comment. A cow-town bartender never permits himself to evince any interest in the peculiarities of those in front of the mahogany. He attends strictly to business, face expressionless, and mind as unruffled as a mountain tarn. To the drunken confessions, the slobbering pathos, the arguments and endless gabbling he is ever heedless. From the chaff of talk he winnows the wheat of "Make mine whisky," slams the required bottle on the bar with one hand and reaches for the money with the other.

At times, when the bar is not crowded, he will perform for his own satisfaction crude legerdemain, sliding a bottle, glass-attended, the length of the bar, gaging the effort with such nicety that bottle and glass pause under the very nose of the patron.

The lemonade in front of them, the three glanced at the back-bar, laden with enough liquor to give a county the delirium tremens, and sighed for past joys.

Jack lifted his glass as one who performs a sacred ceremony, but his lips did not touch the cooling drink. He replaced the glass on the bar to glance rather haughtily at a crowd of Z O Y riders surging through the doorway. The Z O Y men were boisterous and drunk. From their pinnacle of sobriety the triplets viewed the noisy arrivals with disfavor.

"Hello there, three-peas-in-a-pod!" yelled the wit of the Z O Y contingent.

Then, as he glimpsed the three lemonades, and it dawned upon him that the Jetts brothers were about to drink the accursed stuff, he emitted a whoop of surprise.

"What's this world a-comin' to!" he bawled. "The Jettsus a-drinkin' lemonade!"

For a moment he regarded the three with comic sorrow.

"Ain't you scared of rustin' your insides?" he finally asked with a leer at his fellows.

It was an old moss-covered query, but his companions laughed uproariously.

The Z O Y wit decided upon a course of action.

"Bartender," he commanded the wooden-faced one, "throw away that stuff and give these children some real liquor."

He pounded on the bar to emphasize his order.

"Throw away that stuff, I tell you; lemonade's fer wimmen and babies."

The bartender made no move; the three had paid for the lemonade and he considered it their property until they pushed back the glasses. The wag then concluded it high time to go into action. Lemonade was offensive to his sight; he therefore swept the three glasses from the bar.

As the glasses crashed to the floor there blazed in the eyes of the triplets the green war-fire.

But, as Jeb and Joe leaned toward the Z O Y men, Jack raised a restraining hand and addressed the joker.

"You're drunk," he told the humorist with deadly softness; "but fer that I'd tear your heart out."

Clannishly another Z O Y man broke in.

"We ain't all drunk, Jettsy. While you're gittin' his heart, we'll be gittin' a little piece of you. Start something."

Jeb and Joe strained forward like hounds at the leash, but Jack stood firm.

"Remember," he reminded them, "what we promised Miss Mac."

He neglected to lower his voice, and a Z O Y man sneered:

"So that's what you're gittin' good all of a sudden fer. Well, the girl——"

The remark concerning "the girl" was not finished. It is difficult to carry on a conversation when one has received a quart bottle full in the face. Such was Jack's reply to the sneering one, who, under the terrific impact of the bottle, curled up in the sawdust and sneered no more.

The humorist then concluded to enter the lists. A lightning kick from Jeb put him down and out. Jeb's war-motto was, "Git 'em; no matter how you do it, git 'em."

AS THE battle started in earnest a thin, querulous voice called a sudden halt to the scrimmage. There was a note of danger in the voice, and the belligerents turned their heads to behold, enthroned in a look-out chair, a fat old man, wearing an antique plug hat and collarless white shirt whose bosom was stained with tobacco-juice.

It was Judge Wiggins, Justice of the Peace. Afflicted with locomotor ataxia, the Judge's movements were deplorably uncertain. While the hostile factions cared not

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a snap of a finger for the majesty of the law, they entertained some respect for the bulldog revolver in the twitching hand of the Justice.

Men about the gaming-tables began to seek cover, for it was a known fact that when the Judge began shooting no one was safe.

"I will have order," declared the Judge in his cracked voice. "If you boys don't behave, I'll use force—by the gods of Warren's blood, I'll use force."

The bulldog revolver began describing eccentric circles, and several of the Z O Y men involuntarily dodged. But the Jetts brothers, not sufficiently impressed by the Judge's proclamation, resumed the fight. It became a snarling, tearing *mêlée;* and then—*bang! bang! bang!*—the Judge had opened fire.

One bullet shattered the back-bar glass, another whizzed past a gambler's ear, and a third, in some incomprehensible fashion, glanced and neatly plowed a furrow in the scalp of a Z O Y brave.

"He got me!" howled the wounded man.

The Z O Y contingent became suddenly panic-stricken and began backing toward the door.

"I will have order!" screamed the Judge; and again the bulldog revolver barked.

The Z O Y's broke and scattered, leaving the wounded man as well as the bottle-scarred warrior to their respective fates. Yet at the door they seemed to gather new courage and returned to the fray. At that moment a champion of the Jetts brothers entered the fight, crying, "Unfair, unfair!" The Z O Y's lingered long enough to knock down the Jetts ally; and then the Judge's gun banged for the last time, and they fled.

"I guess," remarked Jack after the battle was over, and a hanger-on had removed the wounded, "we'll have that lemonade now. What'll you have, Judge?"

"A little bourbon," sniffed the jurist. "And, bartender, bring it to me. By the gods of Warren's blood, I will have order!"

Jack suddenly recalled the part that the stranger had played in the fight.

"By Judas, boys, we 'most fergot our friend!"

He approached their ally, noting the man's battered derby hat and shabby clothes.

"What are you goin' to have, old hoss?" he asked heartily.

The shabby one clung to the bar.

"Whisky," he muttered.

Jeb and Joe joined Jack, sliding their glasses of lemonade along the bar. Judge Wiggins waited impatiently for the "Here's how!" since he detested wasting good liquor. He knew that by the time his trembling hand had conveyed the glass to his old dry lips he would have spilled a good half of the liquor on his shirt front. Therefore, that the waste might not work a hardship on his thirst, he always insisted on a brimming glass.

"All set?" queried Jack, poising his lemonade aloft. "Well, here's how!"

The three drank their lemonade calmly; the Judge took his drink hurriedly; but the shabby one suddenly dashed his glass to the floor.

Upon the astonished cowboys he turned a face in which suffering had traced many a cruel line.

"No more!" he croaked.

A great compassion smote the hearts of the three. They gathered about their ally, murmuring such endearing epithets as "old hoss," "old sport" and "old cuss." Then they laid friendly hands upon him and led him forth into the cool, sweet night, the while they glared impudently at the curious crowd.

"Next thing," announced Jack, refraining from alluding to the strange actions of their new-found friend, "is a wash-up. We'll then grab something to eat at the Chink's, and then three winks. We got to git an early start fer the buttes. Stranger, what may we call you?"

"Jerrard—Walter Jerrard," replied the wanderer in a low voice.

Jack turned to his brothers, saying quaintly, "Boys, meet Walt Jerrard."

Jeb and Joe gravely shook the hand of the man who had cast his lot with them in time of battle.

Jack, not lacking in shrewdness, was not slow to conclude that the stranger was not prepared to travel the trail with them.

"He's a down-and-outer," thought the eldest Jetts. "It's our job to take care of him."

He laid a kindly hand on Jerrard's shoulder.

"Walt, we ain't the kind that it takes a year to git acquainted with. You threw in with us and we're now your friends. Stay with us andyou'll wear diamonds."

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"I have no money," admitted Jerrard; "but I won't sponge on you boys."

"Sponge nothin'!" snapped Jack. "You threw in with us, and what we've got is yours. Come on; none of that there sponge talk goes. You got to eat, and we got to eat; and we got the price and you ain't. No questions asked, Walt; jes' come along."

Unable to resist the cowboy's hearty invitation, Jerrard followed the three into the Chinese restaurant, where they laved their bruised faces and consumed a great platter of steak.

Later four weary warriors might have been discovered on a pile of hay in the livery stable, sleeping the sleep of men who have fought the good fight.

Jack was the first to throw off the thraldom of sleep.

"Come out of it!" he yelled in the very faces of his sleeping brothers.

Jeb and Joe leaped to their feet with their hair pulling.

"Jack," whined Jeb, "I wish you wouldn't beller that way of mornin's. That's a mean habit you got."

Jerrard raised up and looked about him in dumb wonderment.

"How you stackin' up this mornin', Walt?" asked Jack the friendly.

"Very well, thank you," Jerrard replied with a wan smile.

"We've got it all fixed," Jack told Jerrard as he pulled on his boots. "You kin help the farmer. Miss Mac will need some feller like you to help the farmer. You won't git much wages to speak of at first, but you kin work up. How does that strike you?"

"I'm willing to do anything now," replied Jerrard humbly.

"We've cut out the drink," Jack remarked. "Guess you have too, Walt."

"Yes," firmly.

"Well then," continued Jack, "you stay with us and we'll take you up and see Miss Mac. She'll give you a job."

Dressed in working-garb the three, with Jerrard in their midst, sought the Chinese restaurant.

"Boys," Jerrard began slowly, "I don't want to travel under false colors. I'm just a common bum with no money and no friends—except you three. I do not know when I can repay you for your kindness."

"Wait, let me tell you something," said Jack earnestly. "We don't care what you are or what you've been. You threw in with us and that's enough. You needn't mind to tell us about yourself, or think you're imposin' on us. We're goin' to see you through, and that's all there is to it."

WHEN the triplets, accompanied by the shabby and unshaven Jerrard, clattered up on the porch of the Hemington house, the widow flung open the door, and then threw up her hands in horrified astonishment. The twins came running; and Tana, wearing a short corduroy shirt, a dark jacket and a man's hat, followed, pulling on a pair of beaded gauntlets.

"For the land of goodness, what have you boys been doing to your faces?"

The triplets had not escaped sundry bruises and cuts during the battle with the Z O Y's.

Jack dodged. Miss Mac would now conclude that they had been drinking. He thought he saw a way out of the dilemma. He would answer abruptly, and pass on to other matters.

"Fell down in the dark," he said shortly. "'Most ready, Miss Mac?"

Tana edged by the twins and inspected her riders. The three shuffled uneasily.

Jack could not for long stand the cold scrutiny of her wise eyes; as a diversion he turned and seized the arm of Jerrard.

"This is Walt Jerrard, Miss Mac; he wants work. I was thinkin' he might help the farmer——"

"Jack," interrupted the girl sadly, "I thought you promised me to quit drinking. You have been fighting, and of course that means you broke your promise."

Jerrard suddenly bestirred himself.

"I beg your pardon."

The mistress of the Half Moon glanced at the shabby young man in mild astonishment. His accent reminded her of that affected by certain youths she had met when attending school in the East.

"They fought," Jerrard continued, "but it was in defense of your good name. As for drinking, I know that they drank nothing but lemonade last night. Some man made a remark, or rather started to make a remark, concerning you. Immediately the fight started, with heavy odds against these boys."

He paused and stepped back, as if ashamed of his shabbiness.

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The Jetts brothers exchanged sheepish glances. They did not look at Tana, else they might have noted that her eyes were very bright.

"Forgive me, boys," she murmured contritely. "I humbly ask your pardon. Never again will I jump at conclusions."

To Jerrard she said simply—

"There is work for you on the Half Moon."

The unfortunate youth could find no words to express his feelings, and Jack hastened to relieve the tension by briskly announcing:

"Well, boys, I'm ready when you be. Miss Mac, we got a little stuff to git downtown. Walt here kin drive. We'll soon ketch up with you."

Tana clambered into the buckboard as Jeb and Joe mounted their horses and performed a few cowboy stunts for the benefit of the twins. Jack, now weighted with foreman's dignity, mounted his horse and sedately settled himself in the saddle. Usually he leaped into the saddle without touching the stirrups.

AS THEY entered the gray waste of the first big divide Tana MacElvar turned and studied the profile of the silent man at her side.

She noted the heavy thatch of dark hair, the sensitive nose, and the drawn look about the mouth. Her gaze wandered to the long fingers nervously clutching the reins.

"Jerrard," she asked suddenly, "what is your trouble?"

"It is of no consequence now," he returned wearily. "I'm grateful for your kindness—too grateful to burden you with my affairs."

"Just as you desire. I only thought to be of help. We do not question any one's past in this country."

After a long silence she said:

"This is no country for a weak man, Jerrard. A man is quickly tested out here—and in many ways."

"I will try to meet those tests," he muttered.

She made several more attempts to draw him out, but he seemed determined to keep his own counsel and respectfully declined to discuss anything except the commonplace.

The triplets were far ahead. Jack had made a side-trip to their old ranch to inform the foreman of their decision to enter the Half Moon service, and had rejoined his brothers, leading a bed-burdened packhorse.

Presently the Half Moon buttes loomed up in the distance.

"Home!" cried the girl happily. "Oh, Jerrard, there's nothing like home after all!"

The wanderer drew in a breath of the air, laden with the tang of sage.

"They look like the castles of an ancient city."

His eyes, agleam with hope, swept the pine-crested ridges, the towering cliffs of gypsum and limestone.

"A great country, Miss MacElvar! I do not wonder at your loving it."

"I hope you will feel the same in time," she said gently.

A FORTNIGHT following the arrival of the triplets at the Half Moon ranch the three dragged their round-up beds out upon the grassy sward near the blacksmith-shop. It was a sultry night and quiet.

Jeb had anticipated mosquitoes, but the pests were not so ferocious as his somewhat pessimistic imagination would have them; and the cigarettes of the three glowed peacefully.

"Where's Walt?" queried Joe lazily. "He ought to snake his bed out here; that bunkhouse's an oven."

"Oh, he'll be along directly," said Jack. "There he is now. Hey, Walt!" he called. "Snake your bed out here."

Jerrard came up to them, heedless of bed or bunkhouse. "Boys," he groaned, "I'm in bad shape tonight. Is there a drop of liquor on the place?"

"Nary a drop," Jack informed him placidly. "Cut out that foolishness and bring your bed out here. If we kin git along without the snake-juice, I guess you kin."

"I must have liquor!" cried Jerrard desperately. "It is a lonesome country—I—I——"

The triplets understood Jerrard's condition perfectly. It was not a physical craving, for he was young and healthy; it was a mental weakness not yet overcome. And those wise students of human nature were familiar with the remedy for such weakness.

Jack suddenly sat up and snarled:

"I told you to cut out that foolishness and go git your bed. Do you think you're the only man on this ranch? We've put

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up with a lot from you, and you've got to come clean."

Jerrard could scarcely believe his ears. Jack Jetts was actually angry! He swallowed a lump that persisted in rising in his throat. A rage, incomprehensible and foreign to him, surged up in his heart. He wanted to fight.

"Don't let me bother you," he said thickly.

"I'll bother you quick enough," growled Jack, "if you don't mend your ways. This slobberin' around fer a slug of booze on a dry ranch don't win you nothin'. You're a poor sort of sucker, you be."

That was too much. Jerrard stood over Jack, fists doubled.

"Get up!" he said tensely.

Jack, with a sudden twist of his body, swept Jerrard's feet out from under him; and almost as the Easterner struck the ground the three were on top of him. In spite of his frantic struggles they calmly sat on him.

"It's a pretty night," mused Jeb.

"She sure is," agreed Joe.

"I wonder where Walt is?" asked Jack in an innocent voice. "Thought I saw him around here."

The form under them made several attempts to rise, but without avail. At last Jerrard surrendered.

"Let me up, boys," he requested in his natural voice. "I've made a fool of myself."

Instantly they released him, but ere they could scramble to their feet a clear voice floated out from a patch of shadow.

She came toward them. "What in the world are you boys doing?" she questioned a little anxiously.

Jerrard made prompt reply.

"I was just showing them some wrestling tricks I learned in the East," he lied steadily.

"Well," she laughed, "don't break any bones. By the way, Jerrard, can you read music?"

"Yes, Miss Mac."

She hesitated, as if loath to make the request. At last she said:

"I have a new song I want to try out. Would you mind coming to the house?"

"Certainly not," he replied, forgetful of liquor and lonesome land.

They strolled toward the house.

The triplets returned to their round-up beds. Jack dropped down on his "tarp," sighing heavily.

"Seems to me," he observed mournfully, "that it's the weak sisters that git all the good things in this life."

"Well——" began Jeb.

"Oh, it ain't nothin' to me," Jack hastily assured him. "I'm glad she took him in hand; he has a good voice, too, Walt has. Well educated, that feller. If he'd brace up—— Hell's bells!" he concluded furiously. "What's ailin' me, I'd like to know?"

"I ain't much of a guesser," drawled Joe, "but I'm thinkin' that brother Jack is lookin' jes' a little too strong at his lady boss. I think you——"

Jack felt it coming and fell upon his brother, pummeling him with mock fierceness.

"What had I ought to do with this feller, Jeb?" he asked between blows, and attempting a jocularity he did not feel.

"Aw, leave him be, Jack. If you like Miss Mac you ain't alone; I like her, too. But I ain't what you'd call stuck."

Jack weakened suddenly and sprawled over on his back.

Joe sat up.

"Poor old Jack!" he said softly.

And, as the voices of Tana and Jerrard floated out through the open windows of the ranch-house, Jeb echoed Joe's softly fraternal remark—

"Poor old Jack!"

CHAPTER V

The man who's born without a fear,
And round the country blows it,
Can't grade with him who stays and fights,
While he is scared and knows it.
—*Cowboy Lyric.*

THE triplets held forth in the blacksmith-shop, discussing the fears of Walter Jerrard.

Said Jack:

"He's got the upper hand of the booze idee, and he's cleaned up in good shape. But he's scared—snakes, bronks, bounce of a gun—plumb scared."

Jeb agreed that Jerrard was far from being a graduate of the cowboy school of hard knocks.

"Still," Jack continued, "I has hope fer him. The way he took that woolin' the other night when he thought he wanted liquor shows that he ain't one of them knot-

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heads. You know he apologized fer goin' in and singin' with Miss Mac. I call that right wise of a tenderfoot."

Jack voiced the great cowboy virtue. A real cow-puncher never attempts to curry favor with the boss; he does his work and keeps aloof from the powers that be. And it is not considered good form for a rider to spend any more time about the ranch-house than that necessary to bolt his meals.

"Well, he couldn't refuse her, as I see," Jeb mused. "I'm a-thinkin' that I wouldn't refuse her, lady boss or no lady boss. And I'm thinkin' mighty strong, Jack, if she invited you into the house to try out your voice, that you'd go on a high lope."

Jack's face darkened.

"Don't git pers'nal," was all he said.

"What do you reckon we'd better do about Walt?" asked Joe. "He can't go along and not learn nothin'. Don't you reckon that it's time to sort of toughen him up? He's had it pretty soft since he's been here, milkin' a cow or two, splittin' a little wood, tinkerin' around with the farmer."

Jack considered Joe's words for some time. Although he did not voice the thought he was confident that Tana was beginning to show an interest in Jerrard not purely platonic. It would not be fair to permit her woman's heart to cheat her.

Jerrard must be a man according to cowboy standards before he became the avowed suitor of Tana MacElvar. In the heart of Jack Jetts there was no room for jealousy. He knew that he loved Tana, but he knew that it was a hopeless love. There was nothing left to do except teach Jerrard the folly of fear, that Tana might not be ashamed of the man to whom she had given her love.

As for Jerrard, there was no mistaking that look on his face when he was with Tana. The triplets were well versed in the trail-signs of love and they knew that Jerrard was beginning to dream the ancient dream. Yet his actions found much favor in their eyes. The Easterner's attitude toward Tana was merely that of a hired man. He never took the initiative, never forgot his place. He obeyed her orders with alacrity, but did not seek her company. Yet in her presence he could not conceal his happiness.

"Why not make him ride Lightnin'?" suggested Jeb. "He's had all the old rockin'-hosses since he's been on the place. Lightnin' ain't really no bad actor; jes' crow-hops a little."

"I don't know about that," debated Jack. "Miss Mac wouldn't stand fer Walt bein' hurt. She's a fine girl, but I wouldn't make her mad fer a thousand steers."

"Me neither," Jeb admitted hastily. "Them smily wimmin kin sure go some when they git mad. But Walt can't be draggin' around scared of everything. You don't want to ferget that Miss Mac is a range-raised girl."

"I ain't fergettin'," sighed Jack; and his brothers drew near to lay comforting hands on his bent shoulders.

After a moody silence Jack said:

"All right; I guess we'll start in on him. Might as well commence now as any time."

THEY found Jerrard at the woodpile, blithely swinging an ax, happily unconscious of the lesson he was about to receive from the three self-appointed pedagogues in the school of hard knocks.

"Come on, Walt," ordered Jack briefly. "We're goin' to bust some of them hammerheads you wrangled this mornin'. Come on; the wood will keep."

Jerrard smiled in anticipation of witnessing some first-class riding. At the corral gate he paused and glanced up at the top rail. Jack read his thoughts and said carelessly:

"You kin ride the first one, Walt. Better use my saddle on account of the buckin' pads."

Jerrard's face paled slightly under its new coat of tan.

"Why, Jack," he faintly expostulated, "I have had no experience with bad horses."

A fear—the heritage of a soft people—clutched at the Easterner's heart; and to make his sufferings more intense he had the curse of a refined imagination to magnify that fear. Already he saw himself a bundle of broken bones and bleeding flesh.

"You kin never learn any sooner," came Jack's cold ultimatum.

"You ain't afraid, be you?" Jeb purposely sneered.

Jack smiled as he noted the effect of Jeb's sneer. Jerrard quivered under it as under a lash.

"Of course," drawled Jeb, continuing the good work, "if you're scared you'd better

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trot back to your wood-pile. We supposed that you were willin' to help us now and then."

Jerrard's lip quivered and he searched the faces of the three for sympathy, but each freckled countenance was as adamant.

Finally Jack remarked in bored fashion:

"Oh, well, there's no use talkin' all day about bustin' a few old pets. You kin ride the first one, and me and Joe will take care of the rest, Jeb. Walt here kin go back to choppin' wood; he ain't cut out fer a cow-puncher."

"No, no!" cried the miserable Jerrard. "I'll ride, I'll ride!"

"Slip a hackamore on Lightnin'," Jack hurriedly ordered. He would get Jerrard into the saddle before the Easterner's nerve failed completely.

JEB opened the corral gate and slipped in quietly. There was a heaving rush of horse-flesh, but the cowboy managed to corner a snorting, wild-eyed black and slip a hackamore on his finely-molded head. Lightning, the black horse, was counted by the triplets as broken to ride, but to a novice he would seem a veritable equine demon.

"Better blindfold him," suggested Jack, thinking to try Jerrard's nerve with the strain of preparation. "Kick the rest of them into the little corral. Walt will need the room to fall in."

Presently the black was saddled and ready to be mastered.

"All set," announced Jeb. "Crawl him, Walt."

Jerrard blindly obeyed Jeb's order.

"Jam the steel into him, and hang on to the hackamore," advised Jack as he jerked the blindfold and joined his brothers in a scramble for the top rail.

For a breath the bronco remained immovable, his back bowed, a look of dumb astonishment in his eyes. His forelegs were set wide apart, and he seemed to be bracing himself against an unseen force. Then Jerrard touched him with the spurs and the show opened.

Lightning gave one sickening plunge high in the air, squealing his rage. Jerrard, with the instinct of a green rider, discarded the hackamore and clutched the saddle-horn with a death-grip.

"Stay with him!' howled the three.

Down came the black in a stiff-legged, heart-shaking jolt. Still Jerrard clutched the saddle-horn.

"No disgrace to pull leather at first," shouted Jack. "Stay with him!"

Ere Jerrard could recover from that awful jolt the bronco made another ascent and whirled. That was the finish. An unseen hand seemed to strip Jerrard from the saddle and hurl him against the soft earth of the corral. He lay there a half second, stunned and inert. The bronco, after a vain attempt to rid himself of the saddle, minced over to the opposite side of the corral.

The three leaped from the top rail and assisted Jerrard to his feet. He recovered quickly.

"I'm not hurt," he gasped; "just knocked the breath out of me. I'll try him again."

"He'll make good this trip,"-Jack confided to Jeb, as Jerrard settled himself in the saddle and Joe pulled the blindfold.

The Easterner was now beginning to feel the joy of dominance. He would conquer the animal under him or die in the attempt.

The black's repertoire, for that day at least, was confined to plain bucking, else Jerrard might not have fared so well. But in plain bucking Lightning was a past master. Each heart-jarring jolt increased in intensity until to the Easterner the bright, sunshiny world became ephemeral and unreal. Doggedly he held his seat, taking his punishment manfully; he had not learned to move with the horse and thus avoid the shock of those terrible jolts. Round and round the corral the black pitched, and desperately Jerrard hooked the spurs into the the bronco's side and kept a minimum amount of daylight between himself and the saddle.

The encouraging shouts of the triplets came to him faintly. Once he thought he saw Tana looking at him through the bars of the corral gate. The blood was singing in his ears; he could taste the salt of crimson drops in his throat; the figures on the rail had become a confused blur; the demon beneath him was about to hurl him into chaos. And then, suddenly, he became aware that the bronco was standing still, and friendly hands were assisting him from the saddle.

"You done rode him," congratulated the generous Jack. "You sure are some bronco-twister, Walt."

"Oh, Miss Mac," shouted Jeb to Tana, who had been attracted to the corral by the wild whoops of the three, "he done rode

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Lightnin'—and his first bad hoss, too!"

Jerrard, his mouth and nose muffled in a blood-stained handkerchief, sought the watering-trough; but, as he passed Tana, his eyes flashed happily. Nose-bleed stanched, he returned to the corral and assisted in the successive saddling of a trio of green broncos which the triplets rode with much whooping and hat-flourishing.

Standing in the path of a plunging, squealing bronco which Jeb was riding with loose and easy grace, the Easterner did not flinch as the stirrup barely grazed him.

"Better stand back," suggested Tana a little anxiously, although she had no fear of horses.

"I am beginning to like my lessons," he told her. "I am beginning to understand that a man feels better when he does not dodge danger."

She smiled quick comprehension.

FROM that day the education of Jerrard progressed swiftly. The triplets spared no pains to assist him in killing fear.

He was no longer obsessed with a fear of horses, and had learned to shoot without blinking, but he still retained his horror of snakes.

One morning the triplets found the discarded vestments of a rattlesnake. It was a perfect skin, and they decided to use it in the education of Walter Jerrard.

That night Joe, in stocking feet, with a cigarette hanging from his lip, complained of a dearth of reading-matter. His roving glance fell upon a paper flung with apparent carelessness against the wall, back of Jerrard.

"By jinks!" he fretted. "We never have nothin' to read in this shack. Miss Mac has tons of readin' in the house, but nothin' ever gits out here. What's that paper back of you, Walt?"

Lazily Jerrard turned over on his back and reached for the paper. Then Joe, like all real cow-punchers a natural actor, sprang toward the recumbent victim, eyes bulging and mouth open.

"Snake!" he bawled. "Under paper!"

In that moment Jerrard's soul sickened and slumped down in the noisome pit of fear. He had glimpsed the gray shape, and the sight rendered him spineless and inert.

"Don't move!" chorused the three in blood-curdling whispers.

"I dassent shoot," whined Jeb hopelessly. "'Fraid the lead will bounce and hit Walt."

The plotters stood apparently helpless. Upon Jerrard's forehead the damp of death gathered.

A bright idea came to Jack.

"His head's hid from you, Walt," he told the victim, affecting great excitement. "Come down on him with your fist, and then jump. Jes' his tail is stickin' out. You kin break his back. Smash him!"

Jerrard tensed his muscles. Would his trials never end? Well, he could die as a man should die. He raised his arm, and his fist crashed down on the newspaper. In that moment he suffered all conceivable torture. Then, like a released spring, he flung himself to the floor.

As Jerrard struck the floor, Jeb's gun roared and in the smoke and confusion the heroic marksman rushed to the bunk, yelling—

"I got his head!"

He crumpled newspaper and snakeskin together, and whirling presented them to the astounded Jerrard.

"Take a look," invited the grinning Jeb.

Gingerly, but with his fear of snakes gone forever, the pupil drew forth the old skin.

The three broke into rude guffaws, and punched him unmercifully in the ribs.

Jerrard managed to laugh:

"I might have known you devils were up to something. If I were now a drinking man, I would say, 'The treats are on me.' "

"And in that you would be wrong," declared Jack soberly. "You stood pat."

"He sure did," added Jeb emphatically. "If you'd put up a job on me like that, I'd been goin' yet. As it is I'm plumb unstrung."

Suddenly Jerrard's heart melted. He saw the triplets as they really were—generous-hearted, desiring naught except that which was for his good. He invaded the fraternal triangle and laid gentle hands upon them, not trusting himself to speak. At last with a helpless gesture he left the bunk-house.

"We might tell Miss Mac about this," said Jack, a lingering note of sadness in his voice. "She will be proud of him."

"Poor old Jack!" murmured Jeb. "Poor old, big-hearted Jack!"

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JERRARD had never confided to the triplets or Tana any of the details of his past life. They had accepted him without question, and he saw no necessity of discussing with them affairs that concerned him wholly.

Doubtless the triplets would have evinced some surprise had Jerrard informed them that his father was none other than Henry Jerrard, a financial power in a great Eastern State.

It was the usual story of a son of a rich man.

Jerrard's father had made every attempt to interest the boy in business, but without avail.

He had then put him on a generous allowance and permitted him to go his way. The youth began going the pace, and his father concluded to cut off his allowance and let him drift.

There had been a stormy scene and harsh words. But the elder Jerrard was firm.

"Not a penny till you show yourself a man," he grimly declared. "You've had every chance in the world, but you have made a worthless fool of yourself."

The son had then flung himself out of the house in a high temper. From that on his descent into the depths had been rapid. His credit quickly exhausted, he began drifting and soon became a common tramp.

But now that the triplets had taken him in hand his attitude toward his father underwent a change. He felt that he must write to the old gentleman and acknowledge his mistakes. He wrote in part:

I have been wrong all along, and I want you to know that I am heartily ashamed of my words—words spoken in anger and thoughtlessly. I am not asking that you permit me to return to you, but that you will consider me with your old affection and respect.

All I want now, dad, is your affection.

I am working—working hard. I like this country and the people. They have taught me many lessons that I shall never forget.

I am enclosing a letter to mother. How bitterly I regret all the sorrow I have caused her and you! But I am all right now and shall try to be worthy of you and mother from this time on.

His father's reply was somewhat of a surprise. He had not dreamed that his grim parent could be so affectionate.

MY DEAR SON:

That you are not earning a large salary does not interest me, but that you have cleaned up, mentally and physically, is of vital importance to me, adding at least ten years to my life and mother's.

I, too, have made mistakes, errors of the heart. I could see no way than to force you to make the fight alone; that explains my apparent coldness.

Do not think that I have not kept posted on your movements. Money, my boy, will do a great deal, and I have heard of your movements almost daily since you left home.

The Sheriff at Yellowstone, by questioning cowboys and cattlemen in your neighborhood, and by other means in his power, has kept me informed as to your progress.

Are you sure that you desire to remain in that country? If so, why not go into business?

Now that you have learned some of the rough lessons of life, I should be more than glad to assist you in any manner you might suggest. I have even made inquiries about investments in your section. How about the cattle business?

Holdridge, who is associated with me, holds the controlling interest in a cattle company which he tells me has its headquarters near you. He is anxious to sell, as his investments are very widely scattered and he is drawing them in.

Familiarize yourself with the condition of the cattle company to which I refer, and we can then take up the stock. I do not desire that you continue in the capacity of an employee any longer.

It is my earnest wish that you get into business for yourself.

Mother and I attended the opera last night—first time since you left us. We enjoyed the outing, son.

Affectionately,
DAD.

P. S.—Just got hold of Holdridge. He says the name of his cattle company is the Z O Y—named after the brand. Am sending you five hundred in case you decide to return home for Christmas. Mother wants to see you.

That last sentence brought a blur of tears to Jerrard's eyes.

"Dear old dad," he murmured, "trying to hide his heart!"

Then the possibilities dawned upon him. He would become the head of the powerful Z O Y, with his riders sweeping a hundred miles of range.

Rather eagerly he opened a second envelope, bulky and hinting of legal documents. He knew how swiftly his father operated.

The two letters had lain for some days in the Yellowstone post-office awaiting the outgoing stage to the buttes. It would be just like Jerrard, senior, to close the deal in ten minutes after writing about it.

A brief note accompanied the documents.

SON:

Since writing you I have closed the cattle-deal. Here are your credentials. Use them if you want to stay in that country; if not, come home.

DAD.

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CHAPTER VI

Good man or bad, in this here life
I never seen it fail,
Sometime his thoughts will surely camp
On Love's bright, shinin' trail.
—*Cowboy Lyric.*

DRED MUNFORD came no more to the Half Moon ranch as a suitor for the hand of Tana MacElvar. He believed that she had told the triplets of his striking down the feeble Herring, and that the three would open hostilities on sight. While he carefully avoided any clash with the Half Moon riders, his field-glasses, and such information as he could wring of nights from the cowering Herring, kept him posted on Half Moon affairs.

Munford noted through his glasses that the triplets rode heavily armed and avoided the sky-line. They were anticipating trouble. Also, they never rode singly; they were always within hailing-distance of one another.

At times Munford was tempted to try a long-range shot, but the Jettses' reputation checked that impulse. He could not hope to slay the three, and to kill one meant two remorseless, fearless men on his trail.

The weeks sped by and he had decided on no definite program; he merely prowled, spied and brooded. Already the Z O Y cattle were pouring into the buttes. The Superintendent would presently call him to account.

On a nocturnal visit to the cabin of the nester Herring, Munford forced the old man to give him Jerrard's status in Half Moon affairs. What Herring told him caused a dull suspicion to enter his mind regarding the motives of the Easterner. He resolved to include Jerrard in the final reckoning.

As the days slipped by Munford's resentment against Tana increased. She thought she could get along without him; well, he would show her. She would ascertain that he was not a man to be flouted and spurned.

Day after day he studied the Half Moon ranch. No feasible plan presented itself to his mind; he was not a plotter, his forte being plain murder. Like some torpid snake he lay among the rocks and brooded.

He noted the Half Moon riders come and go, always heavily armed and alert. He watched the ranging wolfhounds and knew it would be impossible to approach the ranch buildings without arousing the dogs. Savagely he watched the Z O Y cattle enter the buttes. They might have given him more time; the little Superintendent was a fool who thought he was in control of the universe. Given more time, he, Munford, would work the problem to the satisfaction of all concerned. Now, the Z O Y would force the issue.

AT LAST his patient watching was in a measure rewarded. He saw Tana, a small basket on her arm, mount her pony and gallop across the divide toward Herring's cabin. Here was an opportunity to see her alone; Herring did not count. But even then he had no positive plan in mind. He merely thought to confront her and tell her a few things over which he had brooded for many a long, hot day. Down deep in his black heart he was conscious of a strange longing just to see her—to hear her voice.

Her farmer had brought Tana word of Herring's illness. Knowing that the old man was without medicine or proper food, she hurriedly packed a small basket with the necessary articles, mounted her pony and sped away on her errand of mercy.

She found the old man seated in a home-made chair, and so weak that he could not rise to greet her.

"I've brought you some medicine," she told him cheerily, as she looked about the squalid cabin. "And I thought you might like some woman's cooking for a change."

Evidently the old man had been unable to cook his meals for some time. The rough table was littered with dirty tin dishes, and a blackened coffee-pot stood on the rusty stove. His chair was near the table, on which, among the clutter of dishes, pieces of days-old flapjacks, bacon and tobacco, rested an old butcher-knife and the ancient cap-and-ball pistol.

The nester feebly voiced his gratitude.

"I'm much obliged to you, Miss Mac," he quavered. "You're too kind to me. Find a chair," he added weakly.

She cleared a little space on the table and began unpacking the basket.

"No; I won't stay long," she said, smiling at him sympathetically. "I just came over to see how you were getting along."

The old man stirred uneasily and gave an exclamation of pain that caused her to turn to him quickly.

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"What can I do for you?" she asked in solicitous tones.

Herring attempted to rise from his chair, but fell back exhausted. He closed his eyes and mumbled incoherently. Then he seemed to gather his strength, and the lines in his withered face straightened with resolution.

"Never mind me now," he cried, his voice rising to a shrill intensity. "Jes' listen—listen——"

The girl came close to him and placed a soothing hand on his forehead. He was probably delirious, she thought.

"Listen, Miss Mac," he beseeched her, clutching her hand. "I weren't to blame; I tried to save him."

"Save whom?" she gently queried, thinking to humor him.

"Your father!" he burst out, breathing with difficulty.

"Father?" she echoed. "I do not understand."

"He was crossin' Buffalo Crick—tried to ford it—current too swift." He paused for breath. "I thought to throw him rope—Munford wouldn't let me—father got to bank—Munford kicked him back—kicked him in face—remember bruise?—he went back and down——"

"The murderer!" screamed the daughter of MacElvar, a dull red spot in either cheek and her eyes aflame. "I will only live to hunt him down!"

"Your father had no use fer Munford—he never told you—Munford wanted you—"

Though she was conscious that the old man was near death, she drew away from him.

"Why did you not tell me this before?" Her voice was metallic.

"Because," he gasped, "Munford could send me back—to pen. I got away—he was guard—came here—knew me—held pen over my head——"

THE cabin-door opened, and, for all his bulk, Munford entered softly. The old convict cringed in a sort of slobbering fear—yet his trembling hand groped toward the ancient pistol.

Tana made no outcry. She snatched up the knife and struck—straight at the heart of her father's murderer. Munford caught her wrist easily, shook the knife from her grasp, and grinned malevolently down in her white, frenzied face.

He would take his time now. First he would amuse himself with the woman, and then he would kill Herring. No need now to think of marriage or desirable ranches; she knew all, and only the present was his to do with as he desired.

JERRARD, unable to contain his impatience until Tana returned, rode after her to tell her of the change in his fortune. He came up on the windowless side of the cabin and was in the doorway ere Munford was aware of his presence.

Jerrard was weaponless; he had not thought of weapons in his eagerness to tell Tana of his plans.

Now he was looking at a black-jowled, burly man, vastly his physical superior, roughly gripping the wrist of the woman he loved. For a breath he hesitated, civilized fear holding him back; then he reverted to the primitive, and with a choking snarl flung himself upon Munford.

The big man grinned his mirthless grin. The shock of Jerrard's body against his scarcely jarred him. Here was something that would give added zest to his blood-feast. He would strangle this smooth-faced tenderfoot before giving the blabbing Herring a taste of purgatory and the girl a glimpse of that infernal region.

He whipped a great arm about Jerrard's neck. Struggle as he might, the Easterner could not loosen the python-coil of that mighty arm.

Slowly Munford's thumb worked down till it reached the soft hollow just over the collar-bone, and then gouged in. As he worked, the big man stared into space in a preoccupied manner. But the single thumb did not satisfy him; he suddenly drew his left arm back, and then there were two thumbs digging, digging, digging into that soft hollow. Having secured the fatal grip, he continued to stare into space as though contemplating some slightly puzzling problem.

Jerrard's hands fluttered. He made several desperate attempts to clutch Munford's throat, but his hands wavered back from that corded column of flesh in obedience to the increased pressure of the relentless thumbs.

Having apparently solved the slightly puzzling problem, Munford fixed his gaze upon the distended face between his hands, studying each feature.

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Jerrard's mouth was open and his tongue protruded. His breath came in a long-drawn whistle punctuated by a ghastly sucking sound.

Deeper, deeper, deeper gouged the inexorable thumbs; then the hands suddenly ceased their futile flutterings and hung limp. Jerrard felt his eyes burst from his head, endured an age of keenest agony, saw Munford's dark and sardonic face fade — and then came black oblivion.

Tana watched the strangulation of Jerrard as one who views some horrid fantasmagoria. She was frozen to inactivity by the slow relentlessness of Munford's movements. Sympathetically she endured with Jerrard the terrible agony. She attempted to cry out, but her restricted throat-muscles refused to act.

A thunderous explosion suddenly stayed the progress of those relentless thumbs. The old nester had finally reached the ancient pistol and made a dying effort to pay off the score standing between him and Munford. But his filming eyes could not even see the living target, and the bullet thudded harmlessly into the cabin-wall.

Yet the big man did not immediately relax his grip. He flung a dark glance of comprehension at the dying nester and then resumed his contemplation of the distended face between his hands. His shoulders heaved slightly and the thumbs sank in nearly to the knuckles. Relaxing his grip, he permitted the unconscious and twitching Jerrard to fall to the floor.

Munford's slow mind now considered the future. The strangulation of the Easterner had been so easy as to be of little interest. Herring was dead and would blab no more. But the girl was now his remorseless enemy.

In any event he would be hunted down by the small stock-growers. At least he could amuse himself with the woman for a time. Nothing mattered now; regardless of what he might do, the price he would have to pay would remain the same. If he released Tana she would arouse the small stock-growers against him.

He knew that the power of the big cattle companies was waning, and that they would not openly defend him. He would take the girl with him, not only to crush her proud spirit, but to hold her as a hostage.

"I'll take her with me," he concluded aloud.

"Never!" she hoarsely screamed, and struck at him with desperate fury.

He pushed her back and drew his gun. With menacing softness he said—

"We'll see."

She read murder in his dark eyes. He would send a bullet crashing into the brain of the unconscious Jerrard. The horror of it almost made her collapse. She swayed toward him, begging—

"Not that—oh, not that!"

"Come with me and I'll let him live," he bargained, now satisfied that she loved the Easterner.

She did not struggle when he seized her arm and hurried her from the cabin. Neither did she resist him when he picked her up as he would a child and lifted her into the saddle.

"Go ahead," he ordered tersely. "I'll do as I said."

Yet he was loath to leave Jerrard alive. A dead man was a safe man. Still, why consider the Easterner? He was merely an educated weakling, easily conquered. What if Tana did love him? He felt sure that the Easterner would not return her love after she had sojourned for a time in the cabin of Dred Munford.

Refined men he knew were slow to forgive and forget, even when the object of their affections was blameless. After all, he had pursued the right course; the Easterner would, on regaining consciousness, suffer a thousand deaths in the contemplation of Tana's fate.

TANA soon realized the futility of struggling with her abductor. Yet, when they reached his cabin, and she knew that Jerrard was safe, she fought him with every ounce of her strength. Grinning his somber grin, he pulled her down from the saddle, and despite her struggles carried her into the cabin.

Holding her easily with one hand, he found a rope he had flung carelessly in a far corner. He forced her down into a chair and proceeded to bind her, hand and foot.

"Rest yourself," he advised mockingly. Then, not ungently—"Want a drink of water, or something to eat?"

Her only answer was a look of white-hot hate.

He shrugged his shoulders and prepared to defend his citadel. Doubtless the triplets would take his trail and attempt to

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storm the cabin. He would be prepared to receive them in a way that would turn their hot blood to water.

He barred the heavy door, opened some boxes of ammunition, and drew up a low stool near the window. Then he carried Tana, chair and all, to a position near the window.

To play his winning card, he had only to reach out and draw her before the window. Rather than wound her, he reasoned, his pursuers, regardless of numbers, would listen to his terms.

He had not decided on his terms, but they did not include an immediate release of Tana. She was his now and he would hold her as long as possible.

But Munford had not foreseen that mystic guard that purity places about a woman, if she will but have faith in its power. Now that she was silent, now that her head drooped, he found himself contemplating her with a gentleness that puzzled him.

He wondered if the rope hurt her wrists and ankles, and was half tempted to release her.

He seated himself on the low stool and rested a heavy hand upon her arm.

"I don't see as you need to be so down on me," he said with the humbleness of the primitive brute newly caught in the flower-chain of love. "I asked your father fer you—he said he'd kill me on sight if I so much as looked at you. I wanted you bad—always wanted you——"

"Munford," and her voice was deadly cold, "if you let me live I will kill you."

Choking with passion, she made a frantic effort to break her bonds and hurl herself at him.

Immediately his old resentment welled up in his heart—a turgid, black flood. He would take some of that wildcat animosity out of her.

He seized the chair-round and drew her in front of the window.

With a snake-like craning of his neck, he thrust his face within a few inches of hers—so close that she could feel his hot breath upon her cheek and look deep into his flaming eyes.

"I'll make you change your tune!" he growled. "I'll make you eat out of my hand and say you like it!"

Then he glanced at the brush fringing the edge of the cañon to the south, and thrust his rifle through a pane and fired.

JERRARD regained consciousness slowly. He made an ineffectual effort to rise, and fell back. His teeth ached and he could still feel the cruel thumbs digging into the soft hollow.

He finally raised himself to a sitting posture and stared dully at the dead face of the old nester. Memory reviving, he struggled to his feet. He felt himself swaying and clutched blindly at the rusty stove. As he fell across the stove, his arm struck the pipe and it rattled down in a cloud of soot.

For a moment he lay still, and then finally succeeded in gaining his feet.

"Munford has abducted Tana," tolled through his brain like a funeral-knell.

Thoughts of Tana being in Munford's power gave him strength to reach his horse. Once in the saddle he made no attempt to guide the animal, merely clinging to the horn and clucking hoarsely. In a few minutes the wise bronco was whinnying at the gate of the Half Moon.

Jerrard attempted to shout, "Munford's taken Miss Mac!" but only an inarticulate sound burst from his tortured throat.

The triplets, sensing tragedy, came running from the bunkhouse, calling in chorus—

"What's up—what's up?"

When Jerrard finally made them understand that Munford had choked him into unconsciousness and then abducted Tana, the three looked up at him curiously.

"You should have died," Jack commented bitterly. Then to his brothers: "Fog it, boys! Git the rifles. And, say, we'd better take old Don along; he may help."

The three whirled and raced toward the stables.

Mrs. MacElvar called to Jerrard from the kitchen door, "Has Tana started back from Herring's?"

Receiving no answer, a sudden fear stirred in her mother-heart and she hurried across the big yard, crying—

"What has happened — what has happened?"

Jerrard's soot-blackened face further increased her alarm and she clutched at his knee, wailing—

"Tana is hurt; I know she's hurt!"

"Munford strangled me and took her with him," he croaked.

The thick blood of shame mounted to his face. He now understood why the triplets

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had drawn back from him, and was not surprised when Mrs. MacElvar shrilled—

"Oh, you weak fool!"

He looked down at her dully, unable to make any defense. He now wished that he had had the strength to hold on till death came to his relief.

"I'll take his trail," screamed the woman. "The dirty dog!"

Mother-love had worked a startling change in Mrs. MacElvar. The quiet-voiced, mild-mannered housewife had become a raging tigress, dauntless and fierce.

She gathered up her skirts and ran into the house. In a few moments she confronted the triplets as they led their horses from the stable. Her sunbonnet was tied securely beneath her determined chin; in her hands was a heavy rifle, and about her waist a belt of ammunition.

"Saddle me a horse," she flung at the startled Jack. "Move quick!"

"But Mrs. Mac—my Gawd!" remonstrated the cowboy.

"A horse!" she screamed furiously. "I'm goin' to save my baby."

Jack groaned despairingly, but hastened to obey her.

"Call Don," he told his brothers, as he turned to secure a mount for the maddened mother.

Don, the big hound, came bounding from the shady side of the house at Jeb's call. Then Jack arrived with a horse for Mrs. MacElvar, and the woman mounted, her skirts awry, the rifle held awkwardly, but her old face set in stern lines.

The triplets gave no heed to Jerrard, but swung out through the big gate and obliqued toward the buttes to strike Munford's trail, Don bounding along in front. Jerrard had received no orders from Jack, not even a suggestion; yet he felt that he could not remain at the ranch while the three and a lone woman dared death on the trail. Doubtless the cowboys did not desire to be encumbered with a novice, but he might be of some service. Utterly humbled, he prayed for an opportunity to die.

If Munford's thumbs were again digging into his throat he would hold on till death released him, for he now realized that there was a shame that was worse than death. There were situations which that old hackneyed excuse, "I did the best I could," would not cover. He turned his horse, for he had now partially recovered from the cruel treatment he had received at Munford's hands, and galloped after the little party.

Don was not a trail-hound but he seemed to know what was expected of him. He bounded toward the nester's cabin, whisked into the door, howled briefly, and came bounding out, whining excitedly.

He finally returned to the waiting triplets and raced past them toward the buttes.

The three, with Mrs. MacElvar keeping well abreast of them, followed the hound at a breakneck gallop.

Don traveled, guided by some mysterious instinct. He did not nose the trail after the habit of a bloodhound, nor did he bound high in the air as was his wont when pursuing a coyote.

He ran straight across the buttes, pausing only at the imperative command of Jack.

"Don knows," Jack shouted to Jeb who was galloping along on the extreme right. "He's linin' out fer Munford's place."

The triplets set a desperate pace, but Mrs. MacElvar was on a swift, sure-footed horse, and managed to keep even with them.

They thundered out upon a high plateau and dashed toward the head of the cañon that wound down near Munford's cabin.

Utterly reckless, and heedless of prairie-dog holes, the triplets urged their horses to top speed.

Midway across the plateau Jerrard's evil fortune caught up with him. The slender foreleg of his bronco slipped down into a prairie-dog hole, and snapped like a pipe-stem.

Jerrard was hurled forward, but the high horn prevented his being thrown over the horse's head. He felt his shoulder strike the ground and the hot, heavy body of the animal crush his leg.

Jack, the watchful, had seen Jerrard's horse fall, but did not pull a rein. The rescue of Tana was all-important. Jerrard would have to take care of himself.

"Jerrard's down!" he shouted to his brothers.

Jeb and Joe did not even look back. Mrs. MacElvar, occupied with thoughts of her daughter's fate, did not heed Jack's shout. Men and horses were plentiful, but she had only one child.

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IN THE shelter of the cañon, Jack called Don back and leashed the hound. They rode along now with greater caution. Pulling in his horse at a point even with Munford's cabin, Jack dismounted and counseled with his brothers.

"Munford's in the cabin all right," he said a little excitedly. "See old Don; he wants to git up there. Hold the dog, Jeb, and I'll do a little scoutin'."

"We got to go mighty easy," advised Jeb. "That son-of-a-gun has Miss Mac, and he knows he holds the high card."

"I've been thinkin' that all along," Jack said hopelessly. "If it wasn't fer fear of hittin' her, we could rush him easy. One of us would be bound to git him. Anyway, we're here. I'll take a look. He may listen to reason."

"We'll stay with him till the last card is played," gritted Jeb.

Jack turned to Mrs. MacElvar.

"I reckon, Mrs. Mac," he gently suggested, "that you'd better hold Don. I'm goin' to do a little scoutin', and then, maybe, we'll all take a try at the game."

"I'm goin' to my baby," the mother announced firmly. "You can fool around all you want to, but I'm goin' right up there."

Jack saw that the time for gentle suggestions had passed.

He bundled her roughly back toward the horses.

"Git back there where you belong," he snarled. "If you expect us to git your girl, git a little sense in your head."

The old woman began to cry.

"Take care of her, Joe," the eldest Jetts ordered disgustedly. Then, in an aside to Jeb—"Dog-gone an old woman anyhow!"

"Hurry up," admonished Jeb. "We're losin' time. Don't take no chances though, Jack."

"Tell you what I'm goin' to do," said the eldest brother suddenly. "I'm goin' to make Munford a proposition."

"What is it?" asked Jeb sharply.

"I'm goin' to ask him to take me in the place of Miss Mac. He's holdin' her to save himself, I think."

"Aw, Jack, let me do it," broke in Joe.

"He spoke to me first," snapped Jeb. "I'll go."

"Quit your gabblin'," reproved Jack. "I'm now on my way. So long."

With tense nerves they watched him crawl up and over the edge of the cañon.

"Old Jack is the nerviest man in the United States," declared Jeb fervently.

"They don't make 'em any nervier," agreed Joe.

"A brave boy," sobbed Mrs. MacElvar, realizing her feminine helplessness at last.

A thin tongue of red-and-orange flame licked out from the cabin-window and a bullet whined over the head of the crawling Jack.

"I see you," shouted Munford. "Git back or the girl will pay."

Jack recklessly exposed himself.

"Take me and let her go," he yelled.

Munford's answer was to send a bullet through the flap of Jack's chaps. Despairingly the cowboy dropped back into shelter.

Rendered frantic by the shooting, Mrs. MacElvar escaped from Joe's clutches and scrambled up the cañon-side to meet the returning Jack.

"I'm goin' to save my baby!" she screamed. "I'll die with her!"

Jack felt like binding and gagging the old woman. He seized her and half dragged her down the slope.

"He wouldn't dare shoot me," she whimpered, overcome by the combined efforts of Jack and Joe. "He wouldn't dare shoot an old woman. Let me go!"

Her whimperings gave Jack a lightning-flash of inspiration. She was right; Munford was bad, but he would not shoot down an old woman.

He gave an exclamation of joy.

"I got it!" he cried jubilantly. "And it'll work! Here, Mrs. Mac, listen!"

He gripped both her hands and told her his plan.

As she grasped the meaning of his intense, earnest words, she grew calm; and when he had finished she drew down his head and crooned over him. Then she prepared to play the part assigned her.

Jeb and Joe clung to brother Jack with the tenderness that brave men accord one about to face death.

They begged in unison to take his place, but he firmly denied them the signal honor of the principal rôle.

"It's my dance," he told them firmly. "Now, Jeb, you and Mrs. Mac git busy."

FROM the cabin-window Munford glimpsed the figure of a man recklessly exposing himself on the cañon's edge. He was about to fire when the

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figure of a woman appeared, and his trigger-finger straightened back.

The man was now struggling with the woman, attempting to force her back into shelter.

"The old woman," muttered Munford, watching the little drama wonderingly.

The man dragged the woman back into shelter, but a moment later reappeared. Munford was about to pull the trigger when Jeb Jetts called:

"We can't hold Mrs. Mac back. She's crazy to see her girl. Will you let her come?"

Again Munford's trigger-finger straightened back. He considered the proposition.

The old woman could not harm him, and, if she joined her daughter, would give him an additional card to play. Yet he hesitated, suspicious of the motives of the triplets.

Then he concluded that they were merely a trio of rattle-headed cow-punchers, overcome by the pleadings of a hysterical mother.

Even as he shouted, "Let her come," the woman reappeared, to struggle frantically with the man. Munford did not want to shoot the old woman, and held his fire.

He saw her break from the grasp of the man, who dodged back into shelter.

She approached the cabin at an awkward run, sunbonnet bobbing, arms outstretched in mute longing.

The gathering dusk made it impossible for him to see her distinctly, and the sunbonnet hid her face.

Munford unbarred the heavy door and stepped back to let the frantic mother pass.

As he stepped back, rifle swinging carelessly in his left hand, the figure paused for a heart-beat to locate the inmates of the dark room.

Then there streamed out from the figure a blinding flash of gun-flame. A breath later the cabin-floor creaked under the dull, heavy impact of a human body.

The tenor twang of Jack Jetts, the consummate actor, awoke Tana from a stupor of astonishment.

"Don't move!" he warned her, unaware of her bonds.

He kept his gun on the dark shape sprawled upon the floor, and struck a match. One glance at the half-opened eyes sufficed.

"Got him," he commented impersonally.

CHAPTER VII

Our beds are packed,
Our duds done sacked—
The best of friends must sever;
Wher-e'er we trail,
We'll never fail
To wish you luck forever.
—*Cowboy Lyric.*

JACK flung aside the sunbonnet, ripped off the waist and overskirt, and sprang to Tana's side.

"I'm roped to the chair," she told him faintly. "Oh, Jack, I knew you'd find a way!"

His deft fingers soon released her. He lifted her to her feet, and, numbed by her bonds, she leaned heavily against him.

He knew that it would be his last opportunity to hold her close to his heart. A mad desire to crush her to him, to kiss her, to tell her that she was the only woman in the world he loved or ever would love, surged up within him; but cold reason quenched the flame of that desire.

She rested in his arms out of sheer inability to stand alone; she had breathed that sweet message of trust, not out of love for him but because of her confidence in his ability to surmount any difficulty.

In a few moments she was able to stand alone, and gently broke the circle of his reluctant arms. He guided her around that still shape on the floor and led her from the cabin.

"Come on, boys!" he shouted; and his brothers, followed by Mrs. MacElvar, bare-armed and in a flapping underskirt, came running up from the cañon.

Tana was soon clasped in her mother's arms, and Jack found himself in the joyous embrace of his impetuous brothers. They felt him over for possible injuries, gabbling like excited schoolgirls.

Jack's account of the affair was simple.

"I pulse-shotted him, figgerin' as best I could on his height and mine. I got his heart."

When the two women had regained some semblance of calmness, Tana turned to Jack and asked with strained eagerness of the fate of Jerrard.

"Oh, he got to us all O. K.," the cowboy carelessly informed her. "Come with us a ways and his hoss struck a dog-hole. He's up there on the big flat. Prob'ly bunged up a little."

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"And you did not stop to help him?" she reproached.

That was more than the impulsive Jeb could bear.

"You ferget, Miss Mac, we had no time to monkey with a tenderfoot."

She did not hesitate. Regardless of weariness and grief, regardless of the realization that she must, to save her mother useless sorrow, keep the secret of her father's death forever locked in her heart, she flung aside her mother's detaining hands and mounted her horse. A moment later she was galloping up the cañon to aid the man she loved.

The irrepressible Jeb was the first to speak.

"There's a woman fer you, Jack," he began.

Jack raised a warning hand and jerked his head toward Mrs. MacElvar.

"Better git her clothes fer her, Joe."

Having secured her garments, Mrs. MacElvar returned to the horses.

"As I started to say," continued Jeb, "there's a woman fer you. Here we tore up the earth to git here, stood up and let Munford shoot at us, and you, Jack, take your life in your hands to git her safe. But all that don't count 'longside of the man up there with a few bruises. Jes' as soon as she hears that he got a tumble, away she goes. That's a woman fer you!"

"Yes," added Joe bitterly; "she didn't even thank old Jack fer what he done."

"Aw, boys, cut out your jabberin'," growled Jack, striving to conceal his heart-weariness with fraternal gruffness. "Shut the door. One of us will have to git word to the Sheriff. 'Spect I'll have to go to Yellowstone."

"If you go, we'll all go," decided Jeb.

He and Joe made a brief examination of the interior of the cabin. They did not touch the body, however. Jack remained outside. Like some skilful surgeon, he had performed the major part and could not be expected to attend to the minor details.

Jeb carefully closed the cabin-door.

The three scrambled down the cañon-side to their horses. Mrs. MacElvar, once more the housewife, had mounted and was waiting patiently.

Don, the hound, had disappeared. He had sighted Tana as she rode up the cañon, and Mrs. MacElvar had compassionately unleashed the eager animal. He had bounded away on the trail of his mistress.

As they rode slowly up the cañon, Mrs. MacElvar in the van and out of hearing, Jack made a rather startling declaration.

"It's time fer the Jettsus to move on."

"What do you mean, Jack?" asked Joe.

"I mean," he gloomily enlightened them, "that we're through with this job. Everything is O. K. now. Miss Mac has everything fixed up, and it's time fer us to move."

"But you ferget the Z O Y," Jeb reminded him.

"That's so," Jack sighed. "Well, anyway, we won't stay only as long as she needs us. Oh, boys!" he added bitterly. "I want to git away—git away!"

They made no comment. They knew that Jack was thinking of Tana ministering to Jerrard. They knew that he wanted to get away and forget. They rode stirrup to stirrup with him, compassionate hands resting upon his shoulders.

At last Jeb said softly—

"Jes' as you want, Jackie boy—jes' as you want."

"Yes," echoed Joe, "jes' as you want, Jackie boy."

They never called him 'Jackie boy' except in moments of rare tenderness.

TANA found Jerrard stretched out upon the ground. His horse stood a few yards from him, holding his broken foreleg clear of the ground.

She flung herself from the saddle, dropped down upon the ground and took his head in her lap.

"Ankle's broken," he gritted between clenched teeth. "I tried to get up, and it turned under me."

"Poor boy, poor boy!" she crooned, brushing back his hair. "Don't worry; I'll get you home."

Then, in spite of his pain, he somehow drew her face down to his.

"Oh, Tana, you can not care for a man who has failed as I have today—you can't——"

"Yes I can," she whispered. "I am here——"

The sound of hoof-beats caused the girl to straighten up and peer through the gloom.

A party of riders approached and hurriedly dismounted.

"What's the trouble?" shouted the little Superintendent of the Z O Y, on his way to

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consult with Munford over the progress of Half Moon affairs.

Tana assisted Jerrard to a sitting posture, and arose and confronted the little Superintendent.

"Mr. Jerrard has met with an accident," she haughtily informed the head of the Z O Y. "My riders will be along presently."

"We ain't so bad as all that, Miss MacElvar," the Superintendent returned politely. "The Z O Y has never refused a lift to a man who was down."

"Are you the Superintendent of the Z O Y?" Jerrard asked suddenly. "If so, I have some papers for you. I—I——" His throbbing ankle would not let him finish.

The Superintendent came over to Jerrard's side.

"Papers fer me?" he queried, puzzled.

"Yes, yes; in my inside coat-pocket." He was clutching his leg to keep it clear of the ground. "Reach in and get them."

The Superintendent drew forth a bulky envelope from Jerrard's pocket. The wondering Z O Y riders closed in, and one struck a match.

The Superintendent quickly scanned the documents, his eye resting for a long time on a well known signature—that of the man who had sold the Z O Y to Jerrard senior.

He came to a quick decision. Folding up the papers and returning them to the envelope, he carefully replaced the envelope in Jerrard's pocket.

"Git Mr. Jerrard on a hoss," he ordered crisply. "One hoss kin carry double as fur as the Half Moon. He's our new General Manager; his father has bought the Z O Y."

At that moment the triplets rode up. They were too astonished to speak. They beheld the Superintendent of the Z O Y actually assisting Jerrard, an employee of the Half Moon, to mount a horse plainly not a Half Moon animal.

Tana hastened rather excitedly to explain the cause of the sudden change in the attitude of the range-lord of the Z O Y.

"Suff'rin' Judas H. Priest!" exclaimed Jeb. "A millionaire in disguise!"

"Wait!" cried Joe. "I'll wake up in a minute."

Jack's decision to leave the service of the Half Moon was now cemented and set. Tana no longer needed them. Jerrard controlled the Z O Y, and it was plain that Tana controlled Jerrard; thus there was no further need of the Jetts brothers' services.

"I have to tell you, Miss Mac," he announced with assumed bruskness, "that me and my brothers quit the Half Moon as soon as you kin git other riders. Everything is now all right with you, and we'll be movin'. We git restless if we stay in one place too long. We're drifters, Miss Mac."

"Why, Jack, I don't understand——"

"Better shoot Jerrard's hoss, hadn't I?" he cut in, still affecting that unnatural bruskness.

"Yes," she faltered, and rode after the Z O Y party, her hands over her ears.

Jack shot the crippled bronco, after Jeb had removed the saddle and bridle.

"There's another thing I don't savvy about a woman," Jeb confided to Joe as they rode homeward. "Miss Mac can't bear to see a crippled hoss shot, but she kin lance a good man in the heart and think nothin' of it."

"Aw, shut off that stuff!" growled Jack irritably. "You certainly do peddle a great line of breeze. Shut up!"

THE Superintendent of the Z O Y dropped back to make friendly overtures to the three. The little man was nimble on his mental feet, and was considering the future.

Also, he was curious regarding the whole affair. Tana had not offered to enlighten him, and Mrs. MacElvar had observed an exasperating silence. Jerrard, occupied with his throbbing ankle and thoughts of Tana, had vouchsafed no information.

The Jetts brothers received the Superintendent with the deference due his position, but with no demonstrations of warm regard.

"Boys," said the little man, "don't think me hornin' into your affairs, but, now that the Half Moon and the Z O Y are about the same—" Tana's anxiety for Jerrard's welfare had not been lost on the shrewd little cowman—"I see no harm in you givin' me a line on what's happened."

Jeb and Joe waited for Jack to give them permission to speak of the manner of Munford's passing.

"You might tell him," Jack muttered to Jeb.

Jeb rapidly sketched the events leading up to Munford's last stand.

The Superintendent listened intently.

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"Then," concluded Jeb, "Jack put on the old woman's rig—good thing we're not big men—and slipped into the cabin. He had his gun in the old lady's waist. He got it and pulled with one motion. That's all."

The Superintendent was slightly confused as to which triplet was Jack, but, concluding that the one on Jeb's right was the man whom the range would forever designate as the man who killed Dred Munford, he reached across the mane of Jeb's horse.

"I want to shake your hand," he said earnestly. "You're a game man."

Jack shook the hand of the Superintendent in dignified silence. It was not considered good form for a man who has performed a desperate deed to allude to it, nor to display any interest in comments thereon.

The passing of Munford, considering the change in the control of the Z O Y, pleased the Superintendent beyond measure. Munford knew many disagreeable secrets.

The little man grew jovial. He cast about for a subject that would please the three.

"Boys, I had to laugh when I heard what you done to my men in Yellowstone. Put it all over them from all accounts. I told them fellers to stay sober, but cow-punchers will be cow-punchers. But they don't hold no grudges. Many's the time I've heard them say that you boys was as clean fighters as they ever met. No grudges a-tall. Well, I swan, here's the Half Moon in sight now! 'Spect I better go on up and help git Mr. Jerrard in the house." He spurred up his horse. "Come over and see us," he called back. "We're on Willer Crick near Red Butte."

The triplets made no reply to that kind invitation.

"Foxy," grunted Jack.

"Slick old rannikin," was Joe's comment.

"Knows which side his bread is buttered on," observed Jeb sneeringly. "Drop him a mile and he'd land on his feet like a cat."

REACHING the Half Moon, the triplets unsaddled and turned their horses into the big corral.

The Z O Y men carried Jerrard into the house. One of them returned shortly, mounted his horse and galloped down the lane.

"Goin' fer a doctor," surmised Jeb, as they entered the bunkhouse. "Ain't it a caution the luck some gobblers have! Rich paws, doctors and nurses, love and kindness, all throwed at their heads at once. Even three old hands tryin' to teach 'em how to act like men—and all jes' as easy!"

"Jeb," requested the soul-weary Jack, "will you do me a favor?"

"Anything in reason."

"Keep that hole in your face shut, then."

"She's done shut," came the humble reply.

THE triplets bade farewell to Tana and Jerrard in the big sitting-room of the ranch-house.

"I think you are making a great mistake, boys," she said, as she reluctantly signed their checks. "You know that I will do anything I can to make things pleasant for you."

Jerrard was reclining in a big arm-chair, his bandaged ankle resting upon a cushioned stool.

"I can't understand why you want to move," he said irritably. "Why, confound it, Jack, you know that anything I can do for you will be done. We have planned—" he smiled at Tana—"to combine the Half Moon and the Z O Y, and that would naturally put you in charge. I haven't mentioned this to you as we hoped to give you a big surprise. I thought that, when I got on my feet, I would straighten up the Z O Y business and then put you in charge. Now your leaving has hurried me. Stay, and you become the range-boss of the Half Moon and the Z O Y."

"Thank you, Walt," Jack said with some difficulty, but added with unmistakable finality—

"But we'll be movin'."

The three hurriedly shook hands with Tana and then with Jerrard. They escaped into the open air with sighs of relief.

"I wouldn't stay," declared Jack, as they rode down the lane, the pack-horse clumping behind them, "I wouldn't stay if he gave me the Z O Y. Jerrard's a good feller, and lucky, but he can't do anything fer me. Besides I wouldn't be—well, I jes' won't be obliged to nobody."

"Them's my sentiments to a flea's left hind-leg," Jeb cried happily. "Do what you kin fer people and then break away. Leave 'em always in your debt."

"Jack," requested Joe, "will you let me make a little remark?"

"Blaze away."

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"I want to say, friend and brother, that when you said good-by to Miss Mac, you sure showed your grade and class. You never so much as batted a eye; jes' shook her hand, looked at her easy, and fogged out. I don't know whether I could do that or not—that is, considerin'."

"Joe," replied the eldest brother, "your kind words make me feel that you understand me. But I would greatly 'preciate it if you never ag'in mention Miss Mac to me."

"That I'll do," Joe gravely promised.

"Me, too," said Jeb. "It's a closed deal."

AT the ford the three pulled in and dismounted to drink, stretching out upon a gravelly bar. As they returned to their horses Jack picked up a discarded copy of the Yellowstone *News*, and glanced casually at the sun-yellowed front page.

He gave a sudden gasp of surprise as his eyes fell upon the head, "Triple Wedding," and then, as he plunged eagerly into the first paragraph, he emitted a whoop of laughter.

"What in Sam Hill you bellerin' about?" exclaimed Jeb, glad that at last something had occurred to lift the gloom from Jack's face.

Jack, grinning fearfully, held the paper behind his back.

"Aw, I guess I hadn't better tell you; you'll take it too hard."

"It's something in the paper!" yelled Joe.

The two made an attempt to tear the paper from his hand.

At last he relented and spread the front page out for them to read.

The "Triple Wedding" head caught their eager eyes, but, ere they could read further, Jack administered the fatal blow.

"The twins have married a couple of store-clerks, and that foxy Hank Morrow has done grabbed off the widder—Mrs. Hemington. Yes siree, boys, this here little paper states that the whole bunch was married last week and went to Omaha on their weddin' tower."

The eldest Jetts struck a dainty pose, picked an imaginary butterfly out of the air and tossed it from him with girlish grace. Then he threw the paper into some near-by bushes and brushed his hands fastidiously.

"Married!" gasped Jeb, and sat down abruptly on the ground.

Joe seemed to be too stunned to make any comment or move.

"You saw what the paper said," remarked Jack without a trace of sympathy.

He knew the fickle-hearted pair would soon revive.

"Well, wouldn't that knock a blind dog into the middle of next week!" Joe finally exclaimed. He dropped down beside the paralyzed Jeb and moodily chewed a straw.

"And I thought she was true—thought little Pearlie was true," murmured Jeb sorrowfully. He leaped to his feet and delivered an impromptu philippic upon the fickleness of womankind.

"Jack, you know 's well's we do that me and Joe wrote them fillies reg'ler once a month, and sent 'em pressed flowers, too. Yes siree, wrote 'em reg'ler once a month, and Gawd knows I'd as soon be shot, hung and drowneded, as to write a letter. But what kin you expect of a girl? Jes' as soon as you think you got one staked out, away she goes draggin' her rope. If you ain't right there 'tendin' to business, she's gone. A girl jes' naturally won't stay hitched. I'm sorry that I ever had anything to do with 'em, dog-gone 'em!"

"Oh, I don't know," hedged Joe, who was making a quick recovery, "I never begrudged the time I put in a-lovin' around."

Jack's smile was now bland.

"It ain't so worse," he said hopefully, and with a sly twinkle of humor in his eyes. "Now that they're married, you won't think so much about 'em. Thinkin' about a married girl is a waste of time."

"Take a little of your own medicine, doctor," grumbled Jeb, and Jack gulped and subsided.

Joe arose and shook himself.

"Ain't it funny," he remarked cheerfully, "how, when a girl gits married, you feel diff'rent toward her? Before that paper tells me that little Ruby had done changed her name, I would have rode down four hosses to pass her a bokay. Now that she's married, I see plain enough that she'll grow fat in a few years and have a double chin."

Jeb's face wrinkled into a relieved grin.

"I be dogged if you ain't said something, Joe! I jes' now recollects that Pearlie always wore run-over shoes, and that her feet had that beefy look. Then her ears were too big. Poor Pearlie had ears she

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could shake hands with. I'm jes' breathin' easy to think they were married, and that we're safe."

"That's the checker!" cried Jack, beginning to feel some of their optimism and applying it to his own case. "Everybody take a new start. We has ourselves; we're alive and well, and have made others happy. What more could we ask?"

He glanced back over the trail to the Half Moon, and shook his head with an odd mixture of pathos and humor.

"The Jettsus," he concluded quaintly, "aren't marryin' men."

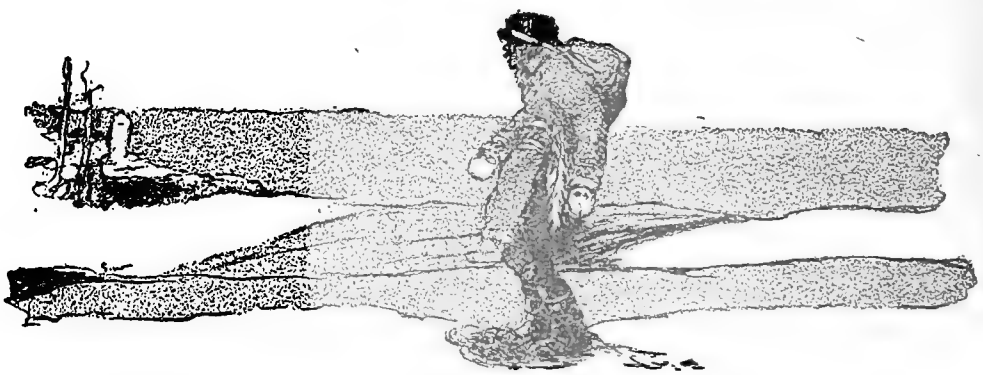
They raced toward their horses and with a laugh leaped lightly into the saddles. The old-time spirit came to them. They were free men, and unencumbered.

Jeb swept his hat from his head and fanned his horse. Jack rose in his stirrups and emitted a yell that could be heard in the distant town.

"The bridle's off the hoss!" he shouted. "Tonight is the Jettsus' night to howl!"

The eldest brother, once more the carefree cow-puncher, smacked his horse's hip. The animal leaped high in the air and surged forward. With the easy grace of the born rider he followed the motion of the horse, weaving, swaying, curving with it.

A purple dust enveloped the plunging ponies. The three broke into song. Then the long shadows of the town crept out to meet them.



The Soft Heart of Jules LeBrun

by Henry Oyen

JULES LEBRUN was too soft-hearted. But for this, agreed his neighbors, he would have been a great man in his own country. His country consisted of some hundreds of square miles of snow-land, where the world is white and frozen for seven months out of the twelve, where a sprinkling of willows and silver birch saves the earth from utter nudity, where the single industry is trapping, and where men rise and attain mastery solely through the strength of the heart and body that has been given them.

The country is called the Western Barrens; and since the grip of the Hudson Bay Company had been torn from it all men said that Jules LeBrun should have been its master.

He was built to be master of such a grim country. Since he had passed his eighteenth year no man had measured himself against him and escaped with credit. Now, in his early thirties, he was so much larger, so much stronger than any other man of the Barrens, that no one was foolish enough to venture a test. Which was as the good-natured Jules, who hated to hurt any one, would have it.

On the trail he could make any other man

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in the district take off his snow-shoes and call, "Enough"! He handled dog-teams as a master of men handles them—they came creeping on their bellies to his feet when he grew angry; and as for trapping—without which there is no excuse for a man's existence on the Barrens—he was the only man of Grand Père who could march off to the Big Barrens—the vast, uninhabited expanse that lay to the North—and come back with the skin of the black and silver-gray foxes that grew supernaturally wary in that desolate, Arctic region.

But—he was soft-hearted.

The first sign of the weakness came in the case of the Cree Indian, Ahnatooka. Jules caught the Cree boldly running a line of traps straight through the heart of the rich fur-country which the settlement of Grand Père had looked upon as its own private preserves ever since Jules' grandfather, fifty years before, had spied it out.

The old men of the settlement knew full well what LeBrun's grandpère would have done to the Indian, and they looked for the old sternness to manifest itself in Jules. They were disappointed. Jules did not despoil Ahnatooka of life, furs, traps, nor even of his dogs. He merely escorted the bold Indian far to the southward and with a kick and a laugh sent him out of the Barrens rejoicing.

"There are little papooses down there in the cabin of Ahnatooka," explained Jules sheepishly. "I could not take their father from them."

"Could you not?" asked one of the old men, blowing smoke from his little stone pipe. "And yet your name is LeBrun."

"LeBrun," agreed Jules, baring his white teeth in a new smile. "But—" he spread his great arms helplessly—"those little papooses, they climbed up my leg. They looked at me—so !—like pups that know I will feed them. Could I take the food from the mouths of those little ones? I answer you: I could not. So Ahnatooka went away alive. But no other man sets his traps in our country; I promise you this—I, Jules LeBrun."

The old men, sitting in a circle, puffed their little stone pipes and looked at one another out of the wrinkled corners of their old eyes.

"Too soft!" they muttered. "Too soft by far. Strong strangers will come. Strong, bad men like Emil Britou. Then we shall have to move from the land which the LeBruns once won and kept for us. The iron has got out of the breed."

Jules laughed at this. He was more concerned with the welfare of his younger brother, Paul, than with the opinion of the old men. The two brothers were all that remained of the family, and Jules had naturally fallen into the position of guardian and tutor to the younger. He always took Paul with him on his trapping-trips to the east or west over the Barrens from Grand Père. On the long trip to the North, into the Big Barrens, he would not permit Paul to go.

"One of us at a time, my little Paul," he laughed. "The furs are rich up there, it is true. Many men have gone after them. Have you seen any come back but your big brother, Jules? There are bones up there, my little brother, of better men than you. Do you keep close to the settlement. Then should anything happen to me on the Big Barrens there will always be one LeBrun left to breed better men to wear the moccasins of our father."

IN THE middle of each Winter Jules went north alone with his dog-team to his tiny cabin at Bay de Loup. There, two hundred miles from the nearest human habitation, which was at Grand Père, he lived for the better part of four months, invading with his traps lands which only he knew.

It was a precarious game that he played there, for when Nature made the Big Barrens she did not intend them for man to live on. Save for precious foxes, for whose skins Jules annually risked his life, and the timid, elusive snow-shoe rabbits on which the foxes barely sustained life through the hard Winter, the region was all but devoid of animal life.

The moose and caribou shunned it, for beneath the hard-frozen snow lay no toothsome tundra-grass to be bared by a knife-like fore-hoof. The musk-oxen at Jules' first invasion had thrown up their hairy heads, sniffed him a mile distant, and had stampeded farther into the white north where no scent of humankind perturbed their phenomenally keen nostrils.

Not even the swift arctic wolf could find food enough there to maintain life through the Winter. It was a land where only a Jules LeBrun among men could exist. A

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man less strong of body would have succumbed to the hardships to be met there; one less strong of mind would have gone mad through the loneliness and desperation of his situation. Jules knew better than any one else the risks he ran.

"The harvest has been placed there by *le bon Dieu*," was his decision. "It would not be right for us not to reap it. The settlement needs the supplies which the rich furs up there will buy. It is my business to see that the furs come down to Grand Père."

Each Winter as the season approached he made his preparations with the care of a man whose life might hang on a single error. His dog-team he selected with an eye to speed and stamina, feeding them and training them until, when the day for the start arrived, they were so many animal engines, rampant of blood and sinew.

On the sleigh he loaded his food-supply with an eye for every ounce that went into the canvas "war-bags." Upon his knowledge of these supplies depended his life; for he must haul enough to last for the whole season.

So closely did the load-limit of the team compare with his necessity that when, at the end of the season, Jules returned to Grand Père the last day's march was made on an empty stomach, even as he had calculated when he set out. It was worth it, however, according to Jules' reasoning; for always he returned with the sled heaped high with the precious furs which made Grand Père the best fed and most warmly clad settlement on the Western Barrens. Then he would laugh as he told how the Devils of the North had tried him during the Winter up there in that lonely land. It was all to laugh at; he was Jules LeBrun; let the devils try their might elsewhere!

"Strange," said the old men of Grand Père, "strange that one who can do such deeds can be so soft-hearted!"

And Jules would laugh and resume the fathering of his younger brother, Paul.

II

IT WAS the year of the biggest catch that Jules for a second time revealed the soft streak that was in his heart. That year he came back from his cabin at Bay de Loup and found that during his four-months' absence Rosa Camette had blossomed out from a big-boned, long-legged tomboy into a softened, rounded girl-woman, the pride and beauty of the settlement.

Jules was amazed. Never had he thought of Rosa as a man thinks of a woman. He counted back the years—she was only sixteen—and he recalled even the day when she was born. He recalled Camette *père's* lamentation that Rosa had not been a boy. Later he remembered her as a tiny child who, as she grew taller, quickly took the leadership of the boys and girls of the settlement. He recalled how she had looked on the day of his departure for Bay de Loup that Winter, tall, gangling and hoydenish, outstripping the fleetest boy as they raced beside his sled to bid him farewell, boxing their ears if they refused to obey her commands—a mere overgrown, head-strong child.

That was but yesterday, and now Rosa was a woman; and such a woman as seldom is found among the squat, heavy women of the snow-lands. Camette, her father, was next to Jules the tallest man in Grand Père and Rosa had inherited his stature in full measure. Already she stood half a head above any woman in the settlement. A mass of shiny black hair tumbled carelessly down her young shoulders, and her brown eyes had become deep and quiet with the mysteries of budding womanhood.

Jules went home to the LeBrun cabin that night with something new stirring in his breast. For the first time in his life the eyes of a woman had reached the surface of his being. Hitherto he had felt that a man strong enough to brave the Big Barrens had no need for women in his life. Now he had seen Rosa Camette and knew differently.

"Paul, Paul!" he cried out as he and his brother sat down to their evening meal. "Have you seen how Rosa Camette has grown?"

Paul looked up suddenly. He was a handsome, slender stripling, Paul, with a smallness about his bones that marked him as one who never would be reckoned among the strong men of the settlement even when he had his full growth.

"Yes, I have seen, Jules," he said quietly.

"Only a day ago she ran and played with the boys—the children!" continued Jules excitedly. "Now she must dress as the women."

Paul waited a moment before replying.

"It is four months since you went away,

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Jules," he said. "Many things can happen in four months. It is a long time."

"But this—this is a miracle!" continued Jules. "Who would think of Rosa as a woman?"

Again Paul looked up at his older brother.

"We who have been in the settlement all this Winter, and—and have seen the change, we could not help thinking of Rosa as a woman," he said. "You must remember, Jules, you have been away for four months. I—I have been in the settlement here all the time—while Rosa has been growing into a woman. I, for one, could not help thinking of her as a woman, Jules."

Had Jules been a little less thrilled by the new light that shone in Rosa Camette's eyes he might have observed the downcast eyes of his brother as the youth hesitatingly spoke the girl's name.

Usually on his return from Bay de Loup, Jules had thoughts and eyes only for the welfare of Paul. How had he spent the Winter? What success with his trapping? Was all well with him? But now it was Rosa Camette who filled the thoughts of Jules LeBrun, and he paid only the slightest attention to what his brother was saying.

To the big man fresh from the utter loneliness of the Big Barrens, the girl was more than a woman. She was the realization of the dreams and hopes formed in his isolated trapper's cabin; and he was glad that he was back in Grand Père now, before any of the younger men could have had time to screw up courage to speak to grim old Camette concerning Rosa's future. He would see Camette as quickly as might be without impropriety.

He had no fear of the outcome of the interview. He was the best man in Grand Père and Rosa was the finest woman. It was proper that they should wed; and father Camette would be proud to make the match. And Paul, as he saw his brother's eyes light up at Rosa's name, trembled.

A WEEK after his return Jules called old Camette into the cabin and drawing aside a blanket displayed his rich store of furs arranged in orderly piles.

"For Rosa," he said bluntly. "What do you say, father Camette? Is it not well that Rosa and I should wed?"

Old Camette, eying the furs appraisingly, nodded his head.

"I have thought so for this week past," he said. "I speak to Rosa before this day is over."

And that night Jules LeBrun again betrayed the soft streak that was in his heart. It was dark when he went to the Camette cabin to hear the good word from Rosa. As he neared the door he heard the sound of sobbing in the darkness. Jules stopped in his tracks. The sound came from around the corner of the cabin. It was the voice of a woman. Jules listened carefully. Then the voice of a man spoke soothingly.

"Do not cry, my Rosa. Tell me—I can bear it—tell me!"

In the darkness Jules felt his heart leap painfully as he recognized the voice as that of his brother Paul.

"How can I tell you, Paul?" sobbed the woman. The blood rushed into Jules' throat as he heard that it was Rosa speaking. "It means death for our hopes, for our dreams—for our love!"

"Tell me!" said Paul.

A moment's pause; then Jules heard the soft sound of a kiss.

"Paul, my dear one, my love!" sobbed Rosa in anguish. "It is this: My father has —has ordered me to—to marry your—your brother—Jules!"

For a space there was nothing but silence in the northern night. Neither of the hidden pair spoke; Jules could only feel that his heart was beating painfully.

"My brother Jules?" cried Paul. "The man who has cared for me like a father—the man I love next to you, Rosa—can it be that he is the one to spoil our lives like this?"

And by the sounds that came from around the cabin-corner Jules, the giant, knew that these two young people, as truly natural lovers as ever a moon shone upon, were sobbing in each other's arms.

It took him several minutes to regain his composure. Then he strode on and flung open the door of Camette's cabin and stalked inside.

Next morning the settlement once more knew that Jules LeBrun was soft-hearted. For the night before he had renounced his claim to Rosa, and, against old Camette's protest, had forced an agreement that she marry his younger brother, Paul.

"Was there ever a big man so weak of

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heart?" demanded the old people. "She was his. Old Camette had agreed. He had but to take her; and he gives her to Paul. Ah, the iron has gone out of the LeBrun breed; there is only the feelings of a woman in its place!"

JULES danced merrily at the wedding of Paul and Rosa that mid-Summer. When Winter again laid its white seal upon the land he again harnessed up his dogs, loaded his sleigh and set off into the Big Barrens for his cabin at Bay de Loup as if nothing had happened to disturb his usual scheme of life.

"Remember, Paul," he said as he shook hands with his brother, "in Rosa you have a woman whom many men will look at longingly. Remember also that you are a LeBrun, and that the name is clean. Your boyhood days are over now, my little Paul; from now on you must let all men understand that the husband of Rosa LeBrun is a man."

Paul stood and watched as Jules and his dogs disappeared in the North. Then he returned to his cabin, and as he looked upon Rosa, as, with a song on her lips, she moved lithely about at her household tasks, he knew that Jules had spoken well.

III

EMILE BRITOU—*Emile le Diable* as he was called behind his back—drove his dog-team into Grand Père and claimed temporary shelter the day after Jules had departed. Britou was not at all welcome in Grand Père. In fact, there were probably few places where he would have been welcome, save perhaps in sundry jails; but when he came to a cabin and, with his little eyes leering through the long hair that hung over them, asked for a place to rest, there was no man then in Grand Père who dared to say him nay.

Jean Poteau, the bachelor, took him to his cabin and fed him. Jean afterward regretted often that he did not slay Britou as he slept that night; for the next day Britou laid eyes on Rosa LeBrun.

"Her name?" he demanded of Jean, and when Jean replied Britou continued: "And her man? Which of the LeBruns is it? Is it Jules?"

"No; Paul."

"Ah!" Britou's small eyes gleamed wickedly beneath the overhanging hair. "It will be a bad day in the North when boneless boys like Paul LeBrun shall keep such a woman while strong men have no women at all!"

With many smirks of false humility he managed to worm himself into the LeBrun cabin, but only when Paul was at home. When he tried the door in Paul's absence he always found it locked. When he knocked there was no answer. The blood of anger rushed into Britou's eyes and turned them red; but he smiled with his lips and retired to Jean Poteau's cabin, and sat down and made certain plans.

Britou went away from Grand Père on the third day after his arrival. He was bound far, far to the southward, he said, and he had rested long enough. He paid Poteau generously for food for himself and dogs. He even passed around a bottle of terrible white whisky which was like nectar to the recipients.

When he cracked his dog-whip and sent his team whirling away to the south he left behind him the impression that Emile Britou was a much-maligned and misjudged man. And Paul LeBrun, being only a boy in experience, was foremost among those who held this opinion.

LONG after midnight that night Emile Britou tied his dog-team in a bunch of willows on the bluff which overlooked Grand Père. It was a dark night, so dark that Britou, lying flat on his belly on the bluff's edge, was unable to make out the small group of buildings that lay beneath him.

Not a light shone from any of the windows. No sound came from the dogs of the place. The settlement of Grand Père was as soundly asleep as the rest of Nature. Britou cautiously slid down the face of the bluff, sneaked noiselessly to the LeBrun cabin, and laid himself down, face up, on the doorstep.

"Paul! Oh, my Paul!" he moaned. "Paul—Paul!"

Within the cabin the moan reached the woodsman's ears of Paul LeBrun, and he sat up, wide awake.

"What was that?" he whispered. "Did you hear it, Rosa?"

"I heard nothing," said Rosa sleepily. "Perhaps you dreamed, my Paul?"

"Paul — Paul — Paul!" came the slow

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moan of the girl from without the door.

It drove Paul and Rosa to their feet. They looked at one another aghast.

"Some one is hurt—it sounds like Jules," said Paul, starting toward the door.

"Wait—wait! Do not go to the door, my Paul!" cried Rosa, some woman's intuition in her telegraphing an alarm. "Please do not go!"

"Paul!" came the piteous moan from without. "Paul!"

"The candle!" cried Paul, flinging open the door. "Light the candle, Rosa."

He bent over the huddled form on the doorstep. An arm with sinews of steel licked up and snapped down his head. The butt of a heavy revolver thudded against his temple. The form beneath him surged up and hurled his unconscious body to one side. As the first rays of the big candle lighted up the room, Rosa LeBrun turned and looked into the barrel of Emile Britou's revolver.

"Hist!" he warned with a finger to his lips. "One cry from you and I send a bullet through your man. Come!"

He sprang upon the helpless woman, and before her wits had come back he had twisted his scarf around her mouth. Half carrying, half dragging her, he rushed out of the cabin toward the bluff where his dogs and sled awaited him.

As he went out, Paul rose unsteadily and cried out. With a curse Britou fired once, twice, and Paul fell. Then, with the woman across his shoulder, Britou fled for his sled.

When the folk of the settlement, awakened by the shots, came hurrying to the LeBrun cabin, they found Paul lying on the floor. He was shot through the right leg near the hip and a second bullet had plowed along the top of his head. It was daybreak when he recovered consciousness and told what had happened. Then Britou had at least three hours' start, and the only dogs in the settlement that would have had a chance to overtake him were those that were at Bay de Loup with Jules LeBrun.

"IF JULES—if it had been Jules!" began old Camette, and then the words died in his throat.

For out of the murk of northern daybreak, straight toward the door of the LeBrun cabin, tottering as he walked, his face yellow with hunger, his dogs dragging themselves along, his sled empty, came—Jules LeBrun! But it was such a Jules as had never before come back from Bay de Loup.

He had no rifle, no ax, no knife about him. Nothing but the bare clothes he stood in, and the dog-team dragging the empty sled. He staggered forward and stopped, leaning on one hand heavily against the jamb of the open cabin-door.

"Jules!" cried Camette in horror. "What has happened to you?"

The yellow face cracked in an effort at a smile.

"Oh, the Devils of the North——"

His eyes fell upon Paul, stretched helplessly upon the bed, a bandage around his head.

"Paul!" he cried, lurching forward with new life. "What have they done to you, Paul? Speak! It is I, your brother Jules!"

He looked around savagely at the group of men the deadness gone out of the body, his eyes suddenly flaring bright.

"Who has done this?" he said in his old voice. "Tell me—quick!"

They told him, Paul at times weakly rallying to direct the narrative. Jules heard to the end, sitting with his head sunk far between his shoulders.

"You say Britou went to the south?" he asked, not lifting his head when they had done. "His trail is clear?"

"From the top of the bluff southward."

Jules nodded. "Bring me food," he commanded. "Feed my dogs."

"But, Jules, what has happened to you?" asked Camette.

"Bring me food; feed my dogs!" commanded Jules harshly. "I have not one breath to waste on words!"

He ate as a famished man eats, with only one thought—to satisfy the hunger-pang of his body. The dogs hurled themselves upon their meat like wolves upon a fallen quarry. For a scant hour after the meal Jules waited for the food to bring back some strength to himself and his animals. Then—

"Hook up my dogs," he ordered. "I go south—after Britou."

The dogs demurred at beginning a new journey, snarling and lying down flat in the harness. Jules leaped at them like a man gone mad. The dog-whip cut them to the bone. He cursed and roared as he struck, and the terror-stricken team leaped up and went southward in a flurry of snow, Jules on the sled, playing the whip with a cruelty

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that was altogether foreign to his nature.

"Ah-rr, mush!" he roared when the dogs attempted to slow down. "Mush, mush!"

When the old leader began to fail and falter Jules promptly cut him loose and went on without him, the cruel pace he was setting not slackening in the least.

Toward noon, to his amazement, he made out a single black speck on the white expanse before him. Half an hour later he stood face to face with Rosa who, alone, and with Britou's revolver in her hand, was hurrying back to Grand Père.

"Britou?" said Jules shortly.

"He fled so swiftly that I missed him when I fired," said Rosa. "He went southward."

Jules pointed questioningly at the revolver, his face ugly in its sternness. Rosa laughed.

"It is all well, Jules," she said. "Your name is still clean. The fool believed me when I said I was glad to go with him. I waited until he was off his guard; then I stole the gun. But he fled so swiftly that I missed him when I fired. And—and Paul?" she concluded breathlessly.

"Is waiting for you," said Jules. "Go to him as swiftly as you can. I go on after Britou."

An hour later he cut loose another dog and continued on without stopping. As nightfall came on, the dogs lay down in their tracks and took the whip-cuts without stirring, unable to go a step farther.

Jules threw the whip away and went on afoot. Near midnight he came upon Britou's camp. Britou slept soundly, reckoning himself safe from pursuit, and Jules had him securely bound ere the sleep was fully driven from his eyes.

Jules ate ravenously and hurriedly of Britou's food. Then he did what no other man would have thought of doing; he tied Britou to his own sled, hitched up Britou's dogs and, in the sheer blackness of the night, and without a minute of rest, started back on the long trail to Grand Père.

Staggering and tottering, he came driving into the settlement next evening. His eyes were sunken and his lips were thin and blue.

"Guard him," he mumbled, pointing at the helpless Britou. "In the morning—in the morning we judge. We shall see——"

He toppled over in his tracks and knew nothing of the willing hands that dragged him to his bunk.

IV

IT WAS a different Jules who next morning greeted the men of Grand Père as they came dragging Britou into the LeBrun cabin. The marvelous virility of the man had restored life in his overdriven body during his twelve hours of slumber, and a breakfast sufficient for three healthy men had filled his being with a sense of comfort.

Also, it had become apparent that Paul would survive his wounds, though doomed to go through life with a crippled leg, and thanks to Rosa's securing the revolver from Britou, the LeBrun name still was clean.

So it was with the smile and ready laugh of old that Jules greeted the arrival of Britou and his guards; and the men of Grand Père cursed, seeing that Jules once more was in his old soft-hearted mood.

"Now, I will tell you this, Jules LeBrun!" said old Camette fiercely. "We will have none of your softness in judging this man. It is no time for weakness of feelings. It is only through the will of *le bon Dieu* that your brother Paul is not dead and my daughter Rosa a dishonored woman. The heart of Britou was bent to kill and ravish. The wrong that he has put upon this settlement can be righted in only one way."

"And that is?" said Jules.

"Shoot him!" said three or four voices as one.

Jules LeBrun smiled. He looked around the low-ceilinged room; first at the helpless Britou, next at his brother Paul, and then at Rosa.

"Who should judge this man?" he said thoughtfully. "You men of Grand Père, you can not do it, for it is not your affair. It is a matter for our family to decide. Paul, what do you say? Will you judge him?"

The wounded man twisted his head and looked at the prisoner, and was silent.

"Rosa," continued Jules softly, "what of you? You have the right. Will you judge him?"

The woman hung her head; then suddenly raised it and looked at her husband.

"Paul," she said, "I wish your brother Jules to judge him. What do you say?"

A look of relief spread over Paul's face as he reached up and took her hand.

"Thank you, Rosa," he said. "It is for our family to do it. Yes; I, too, wish Jules

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to judge what the punishment of Britou shall be."

"Well and good," said Jules swiftly, before the other men could utter their protests. "I will judge. And it is not my judgment that Britou shall be shot, for there is no man in this settlement who would press the trigger but myself, and I have no wish to shoot a man kneeling in the snow before me.

"This is my judgment: Emile Britou, you are to be banished into the North. You are not fit to live in a land where other men and women dwell; you belong at Bay de Loup, where there are only animals and the North's strange Devils to keep you company. Thither will you go—on foot. You will set out at once. You will be given food for three days, and you will be at my place at Bay de Loup on the fifth. So the last two days on the trail you will be without food. Then you will come to my —to my place.

"You will be given nothing else. No knife, no ax, no rifle—only enough food to keep you alive until you reach my place up there. That is the chance I give you; for I do not wish to shoot you—unless you attempt to turn back on the trail. What do you say, Britou; will you go to Bay de Loup?"

Britou bowed his head.

"I go," he said.

With a sudden flash of his eyes Jules cowed the protests of the crowd and led Britou from the cabin. Three days' scant rations he stuffed into the man's pockets. Then he cut the thongs that bound Britou and pointed sternly toward the white, uninhabited North.

"Go," he said. "Do not try to turn back."

HE WATCHED while Britou with great eagerness fled swiftly over the frozen whiteness, watched while he grew smaller and smaller until at last he disappeared on his long hard march to Bay de Loup. Then he returned to Paul's bedside.

"Soft-hearted again!" sneered old Camette. "What manner of a LeBrun are you? You send him forth to your own cabin. You give him life and comfort. When he reaches your cabin he will be safe. He will find food and traps. He will grow fat. Bah! What manner of judgment do you call that?"

But Jules was laughing his old, care-free laugh.

"Friends," he said, "I will now tell you what happened to me that I was forced to come back to Grand Père in the middle of the Winter, half-starved, without furs, without rifle, without even an ax. It was a coal from the fire that did it. It fell in a corner and smoldered while I slept. The flame on my hand awoke me. I sprang through it, and I am here alive only because the dogs and the sleigh were outside.

"But it all went, my friends, the cabin and all that it held—food and all; it all went up in the flames. So when Britou, with his belly crying from two days' hunger, comes staggering up to Bay de Loup, he will find, instead of the food and shelter to save him—nothing. Nothing, nothing, my dear friends. Nothing but cold ashes, which the strange Devils of the North playfully kick around on the snow."

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Featuring Morton St. Clair

A Tale of the Movies

by **Gordon McCreagh**

CHARLES JAMES STUART dangled his bare feet over the edge of his bed and whistled cheerfully through his teeth. He was without a job again.

The evening before had seen him hurled forth into an unsympathetic world by a champing and slavering real-estate operator, for no other reason than that he had conducted a profitable negotiation on an outlying property on the evidence of specifications and photographs furnished by the aforesaid operator himself. The prospective client had come into the office and a quick sale seemed imminent—only, it happened to have been the wrong photograph.

Only three weeks before that he had been demonstrating the advantages of a vacuum cleaner that "sold itself" on the strength of having "nothing to get out of order"; and had taken it to pieces to convince a Dutch hardware merchant as hard headed as his own wares. The merchant had remained unconvinced, and Charles James had taken the instrument home in sections.

Before that again—— But it is sufficiently evident that his present condition of untrammeled freedom was the normal. Had been, in fact, ever since he had packed three shirts and a like number of socks—the extra one as a receptacle for a comb, a razor, and a toothbrush—into a grip and casually informed his uncle that he guessed he would go and invade the big city.

The big city lay at the other end of a sixty-dollar railway journey; but the uncle had merely grunted and insisted that he still clung to the belief that his nephew would arrive some day at years of discretion. The nephew had done this sort of thing before. He was one of those hereditary wanderers who would start for the weirdest places on a whim, and trust to blind luck to see him through.

"Guess so," he had replied unoffended. "I'll write—sometimes. So long!"

The invasion had not been productive of any considerable loot so far. Conditions in the big city were perplexingly different from those in the open places to which he had been accustomed, as, for instance, on his uncle's fruit ranch; and the swift-following successions of the normal were surely sufficient cause for worriment.

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He was worrying now, after the manner of his kind. That is to say, he stretched and yawned prodigiously three times.

"Ah, does one good to get up when he feels like it," he mouthed from behind his hand, and proceeded to grope under the bed for his socks.

Then he got a stick and groped some more. Then he said, "——," and lit a match and applied it to the gas-jet.

Not that it was night-time—by no means. It was an early morning in Summer. But the young optimist had elected to live downtown, on a restricted and irregular income. As he himself had put it to the belligerent lady who was conducting him through the inner catacombs—

"That'll be two dollars for the room, I suppose, and fifty cents for the view."

He could take the whole view into his hands by simply leaning out of the window.

He improvised in minor cadences through his teeth some more, the while he filled a kettle of the ten-cent-store species and put a match to the little gas-ring.

Immediately the jet above, nominally a four-foot burner, but emitting only about half the specified quantity of light, sank to a quarter. The whistling stopped, and Charles James climbed on to a chair to prod at the burner with a pin.

He paused and reached out perilously with one naked foot to push open the door and listen to the sounds of an altercation in the dim hallway below.

"Tell him it's Mr. Stafford," came a voice, indistinct through the heavy gloom.

"It's all right, Mrs. Sloosh!" he yelled. (The lady's name was Schluessel.) "Come on up, Staff. Thirteen steps and turn, and then three more—and look out for brooms and stray buckets."

"Say," greeted his friend, "does it ever get dark here at night? — An' hoo's Wee Jeamie the morrn?"

"Wee Jeamie," who weighed one hundred and eighty pounds, trained, replied:

"Fit as a buck, and fired yesterday. You're just in time for coffee, Staff. Grope around outside the door and you'll find some rolls—that is, unless Rehoboam from next door has snaffled them again."

"Fired?" said Stafford tranquilly. "Good! Well, hurry up and dress. I've got a 'phone from Frankie Hanlon for pictures."

"Oh, staff of life!" crowed Jem. "Gr-reat man! Where's it for?"

"Don't know," replied the other. "Ow-w! Leggo, you gorilla! We'll have to find out at the office."

" 'LO, BILL," greeted the agent. "Glad you came. Here it is; with the Motiograph people, in New Jersey. You meet at Twenty-ninth Street ferry—dollar-fifty and lunch. Here's a couple of cards; and hurry, so you get in on it. This is likely to last four or five days."

"*Muchos gracias*, Frankie. Come along, Jem."

"Say!" The agent stopped them as they were at the door. "Do either of you know anything about boxing? I got a call here for a picture-actor who can box."

"Why—" Stafford turned in a flash—"my friend Jem here; he's a half-way professional."

The agent appraised friend Jem with narrowed eyelids.

"Is that straight goods?" he asked suspiciously.

"Why, you know *me*, Frankie," avowed Stafford warmly. "And I'm telling you that Jem is the star of his club."

"Well, I suppose it's all right then," Hanlon conceded. "You take my card to the Vitascope studio in Brooklyn; and for Mike's sake don't let on that you've only suped before. They wanted an actor, but I simply can't find one to fill the bill."

"Five bones a day for you, Jem," chuckled Stafford in the street. "Ain't I a wiz? This is *extra* work, my boy, an' puts you where you can break right in to regular posing. Say, d'you know anything about boxing at all?"

The artless innocence of the inquiry was staggering.

"I've had gloves on before," admitted Jem in a dubious tone.

"Bluff 'em!" snapped the other. "Bluff 'em! All you have to do is to tell them the story of how you fought Volinsky in the West before he was known, an' you'll have 'em scared paralytic."

With which wise observation this shrewd snapper-up of opportunities boarded the car for the ferry.

"BREAK right in." Yes, the opportunity was there right enough; but Jem had no hallucinations about its facility. He knew that picture-acting required a combination of peculiar qualities,

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and that the fascinating picnic-life and steady salary were impelling half the legitimate actors in New York, to say nothing of quite two-thirds of the ordinary public, to try, more or less vaguely, to establish a footing.

The competition was enormous; but the young American-Scot smiled widest and whistled most out of tune when the difficulties were thickest. And his grin, as he now sat in the Brooklyn subway, was far more seraphic than at any time during his recent experiments in business.

Jem found the Director talking earnestly with the camera-man, and presented his card of introduction.

"Oh, from Hanlon?" flashed the former in his quick, jerky style. "What d'you think of him, Billy?"

"He has the appearance all right, Mr. Gresham," rumbled the camera-man, appraising Jem critically to his face with as little restraint as if he were a horse. "An' the build. An' I think he'll take well."

"That's what I think," agreed Gresham. "It remains to be seen whether he can act. Can you box? Well?"

Jem was unable to play the bluff-game like his city-bred friend, and was modestly explaining that he thought he could fill the bill when the Director cut him short with:

"Well, we can rely on Hanlon for that part of it. You'd better run along and make yourself known to the bunch; we'll be starting in a minute now."

The "bunch" received Jem with the courtesy that the family extends to "company." Company is welcome; but it is none the less not of the family circle; and, as the "extra" man is on a pinnacle above the dollar-fifty "supe," so are the members of the permanent stock on the sublime heights of Parnassus.

Meanwhile the camera-man and the Director looked after Jem with critical estimation. Mr. Gresham owed much of his success to an early recognition of the fact that the ultimate film owed as much to the camera-man as to himself, and, unlike many of the autocrats in his profession, worked with the latter accordingly.

The camera-man was an artist with an eye for scenes, and groups, and pictures, and a phenomenal judgment of actinic light. The Director was the actor, with a keen knowledge of the worth of gesture and dramatic effect. Together they formed a team that was making the Vitascope films the feature of the picture-houses; and incidentally, the Vitascope company the aim of every picture-actor in New York.

Had Jem known all these things, his tuneless whistle would perhaps have contained a further underlying motif of discord. Breaking in on the "Flying V" was an exceedingly difficult undertaking.

The camera-man spat a frayed toothpick from his lips and inserted a fresh one in its place.

"Goin' to try him out, Mr. Gresham?" he hazarded.

"Good gosh, no," replied the other, startled. "St. Clair will show off on him, and he'll get cold feet like all the others and quit."

"Don't size up to me like a frozen foot," grunted the camera-man.

"Maybe not; but I can't take any more chances. There's a hurry-call for this film from the office, and I've *got* to get it out. They've gone and published the release-date already. No, I can't take the risk. We know from Frankie Hanlon that he's a boxer—" the agent must have served him pretty well in the past—"and in the big scene we'll just tell him to stack up the best he knows, and just leave it to St. Clair to let it go about two hundred feet."

Which explains the fly in the directorial honey, and the reason of the unusual call on the agent.

THE scenario, which had been written up to feature Morton St. Clair, turned on the rivalry between two college students—rah-rah boys are always romantic—in which the girl, whose father was of the faculty, was attracted at first by the athletic prowess of the "other man;" while St. Clair, starring as the unostentatious hero, after being subjected to the usual slights at the hands of his rival, and the consequent imputation of cowardice, in spite of a noble rescue of the girl in a boating upset—establishing the element of sympathy—was finally taunted into competing in the annual boxing competition, in which he defeated his confident rival with a melodramatic flourish that thrilled the hearts of the five-centers. This constituted "punch," and the success of the film was assured.

The little difficulty which had held up the Director so far had been one of Morton

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St. Clair's affectations. The star was typical of his kind. He possessed a figure which a dexterous tailor could mold to heroic proportions. His features showed all the regular beauty and weakness of a Greek god; but contrary to the usual run of his confrères he was really a fine athlete.

The trouble was that he was leading by half a lap in a popularity contest running in a ladies' magazine, and the adulation from Maisie of the men's neckwear and Rosie of the ribbon-counter had been bad for his soul. He had fallen into posing all the time, and he was convinced that it was up to him to show his full worth whenever occasion arose.

The result had been physically disastrous to all the applicants for the "other man's" part, whose pugilistic skill the Director had hitherto rashly insisted on trying out in his determination to impart realism to the climactic scene. Hence the call on Frankie Hanlon for a new and unsuspicious victim.

"No," repeated the wary Director. "I can't take a chance on trying him out beforehand; and I'll have to warn the bunch not to put him wise."

Had Jem known of these inside details he would probably have fallen to whistling the bagpipe tunes of his ancestry. Breaking in on the "Flying V" was not only difficult, but hazardous.

MR. GRESHAM clapped his hands and a call of "Company!" went through the big studio. The loitering members gathered round and the Director read the synopsis over to them.

"Now then, people," he continued briskly, "we're going to rush a short indoor scene in first, and then we'll take advantage of the day and try to clear off all the outsides. I want you to help me on the jump."

"Who's in on the scene?" shrilled a voice.

The Director turned testily.

"My dear girl, don't be in such a hurry; I'm coming to that right now. We'll take scene three, 'Parlor in Professor Harvey's House.' That'll be Crandall, Professor, and Miss DeNeen, Marjorie—you know your make-up. St. Clair and Stuart, the two rivals; you'll want just a touch of sunburn, both of you—*you'll* hardly need any, Stuart. Hurry now and let's get down to business—quit mushing, you two."

The company laughed, and Miss DeNeen drew away indignantly from the star's side.

The scene showed the star calling on Marjorie and devouring her with his eyes; and the Director put them through a swift rehearsal.

"Now you come in, Davies—" this was to Jem—"and you jump up, Marjorie, and give all your attention to him—so! Show more pleasure, Marjorie! Get close to him; you're supposed to be an enthusiastic, romantic girl—— No, that won't do. And Davies, you must look more as if you were used to it and it didn't excite you one bit."

Jem was desperately hiding his trepidation under a mask of exuberance; but it looked like good acting, only a wrong interpretation of the part. However, the Director's new instructions to look accustomed to the attentions of a perfect dream of a girl were much more difficult to carry out.

The girl herself was his salvation. She so positively radiated the cold impersonality of the professional, and added thereto such a strong impression that her real interest lay elsewhere, that Jem's exuberance was chilled to just the correct degree required by the Director.

"So!" he nodded. "That's more like. Now we'll run through it once again, and speed up a bit, all of you—so! Good! That's just about sixty feet. Now we'll pose it—*lights!*"

The big arc-lamps overhead flared out with a hiss and a splutter. One of the hands tilted forward the vapor tubes at the side till the radiance literally flowed into them with that peculiar metallic tinkle which nobody can explain. Then he slowly eased them back to an upright position.

"All ready?" sang out the Director. "Camera!"

This was the signal to begin, and the Director called the action as each part came along, all highly strung and nervous.

"Five—ten—fifteen." The operator monotonously called off the seconds and calmly turned the crank at two steady revolutions to each.

"Fine!" acclaimed the Director. "That went good. Now then, pose for a still, Marjorie talking to Davies—St. Clair and Miss DeNeen, this is *business* now."

"How does he shape, Billy?" inquired the Director of his colleague with the camera, wiping his brow while a small strip of the film was being developed as a test piece. The scene had really been gone through as

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a trial of Jem's ability, though he had been mercifully unaware of it.

"Shapes good," grunted the other. "An' takes well."

JEM found the outside pictures very much easier. The open air was his home. Here he felt free of all restraint, and here he made love to the fair heroine with all the ardor of a young college student—anybody could make love to Helen DeNeen as if he meant it.

"What are you giggling at, Edna?" demanded a girl with the sauciest of retroussé noses and great innocent eyes.

"I was just thinking how funny it is," gurgled Edna. "How Helen has to make love to the extra in the pictures and give Morton the icy; and off scenes it's just the other way round—she's terribly stuck on him."

"Well, why not?" defended the other composedly. "Most of us love our lovely lead; he's considerable more of a man than most stars I've worked with. But I rather like this extra," she continued with a critical wrinkling of her freckles. "He's got a dare-devil sort of a face—and I like his big shoulders."

From which it may be gathered that the saucy one was a lady of fine discernment.

Scene Nine was the boating-rescue. The camera-man had previously hunted out a superb stretch of river, where the stream fell in a cataract, which, by clever film-faking, showing the upper half first and then the lower, could be made to convey an impression of the roaring falls of the Zambezi.

"*Some* picture, Mr. Gresham; eh?" he chuckled with a pardonable pride.

The Director was looking at the scene from under puckered eyebrows, swiftly reviewing its dramatic possibilities.

"Good gosh!" he muttered at length. "What a picture! What a picture we could make if we could have her rescued right within a few feet of those falls—just as the fierce current is taking her into its merciless grip!"

His words were unconsciously taking the dramatic expression of his thoughts.

"Mm-m. How could you fix it so they wouldn't go over? The scenario don't call for an ambulance scene."

"Don't know," frowned the Director. "Unless—— We might stretch a cable across, under the water-level where it wouldn't be seen—— Wonder if——"

He expressed his wonder to the two players directly concerned, and was not left in doubt for long.

"No, sirree!" announced St. Clair with decision. "Set me an easier one. I'm a professional actor; not a professional dare-devil."

Jem saw his opportunity to make a good impression with the Director, and seized it with a promptness that would have done credit to the alert Stafford.

"I'd take a chance, Mr. Gresham," he volunteered. "Couldn't you fix it by showing Mr. St. Clair jumping in first and then dragging her out after; and if you let me take the part out there in the distance with the water splashing about, the difference wouldn't be recognized. If—if Miss De Neen would——

The girl saw the challenge in his eyes, and responded pluckily.

"Yes, I will," she avowed. "If he does, I'm not afraid."

St. Clair wished he had not spoken so hastily. But it was too late to retract now.

He could not very well go back on the attitude he had adopted at the outset and thereby tacitly admit that he had been shamed into the part, and particularly by a stranger from without the family pale. All that was left to him was to try and carry it off with the lofty condescension of the champion who stands aside that others, less skilled, may compete; and to hate accordingly the interloper who had put him to humiliation.

The party sat down to one of those picnic lunches that add so much to the fascination of the picture-actor's life, while one of the scene-hands was whirled off in a big automobile to procure a stout hempen cable, somehow, somewhere—and in the shortest time possible.

A scene-hand, whose duty in outside pictures is to re-create Nature according to the Director's requirements, has to be a person of wits and a brazen front in order to meet the unforeseen exigencies of picture-making, as many an outlying farmer can testify.

"How do you propose to fix it, Mr. Gresham?" inquired one of the girls—she of the fuzzy hair and dimples, whose face is so familiar in a certain dental advertisement.

"Simple," replied the Director; he had already thought out all the details. "Just

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drive a good stake into each bank a little above the falls and tie the rope across a few inches under water. Say, Billy, you might see about the stakes; will you?"

In a remarkably short space of time "Hoimie," the scene-hand, returned with a brand-new cart-rope which he had purchased at an exorbitant price from a "blank-blank Polackish truck-farmer."

While the preparations were being completed a picture was taken of the star heroically hurling his coat aside and jumping into the water, and another of him emerging with the dripping, unconscious girl. Both of which operations he performed with a very bad grace and a by no means heroic expression.

THE boat-scene followed immediately. As the girl rowed gracefully out, Jem could not help wishing that it might be his good fortune to save her from some real danger.

"Got her in the picture, Billy?" asked the Director. Then, "All right!" he yelled. "Upset her."

The girl performed the maneuver gracefully again and began floundering realistically in the water while the boat floated away down the current.

"Go ahead, Stuart! Don't flurry when you get to her; you're the cool, intrepid hero now."

The Director ran his fingers through his hair till he looked like a wet porcupine; his nervous temperament was beginning to show, as always during a picture.

"Where does he come into the picture, Billy?"

"'Bout half way down. 'T'll be just right."

The camera-man adroitly shot his toothpick to the other corner of his mouth like a shuttle and turned steadily, two to the second.

The Director was watching anxiously.

"So!" he yelled to Stuart. "Now you start bringing her in."

Jem took the girl under her arms, and, mindful of the admonition not to flurry, turned on his back and headed shoreward with a long easy stroke after the prescribed procedure of life-saving drill.

"Too tame!" shouted the Director. "You've got to look as if you were in real danger."

"Talking about danger," the camera-man interrupted evenly, looking like a hawk straight in front of him through his viewfinder, "ain't that boat sailin' over your rope a bit too easy, Mr. Gresham?"

And following swiftly on that, with the utmost composure and never a fractional variation in his speed— "Ain't that one o' your stakes, Herman, floatin' down?"

The scene-hand rushed to the spot where the stake had been. The keen-eyed camera-man was right. It was one of his stakes.

Just as a clothes-line will tighten in the rain and tear its pulley-fastenings from the pole in the back yard unless the *hausfrau* has taken the precaution to loosen it, so the new rope had contracted with its immersion and softly pulled the stake out of the bank. The camera-man, with his vision trained to observe every possible encroachment into the field of his instrument, had been quick to notice these things out of the corner of his eye.

"Getting tired, Mr. Stuart?" the girl asked evenly from her comfortable position resting on his shoulder. "You don't have to hold my head up so high, you know."

"Not a bit," boasted Jem. "I could go on doing this for a week—with you."

While he was still chuckling at the indignant look on her face, the stake slid smoothly over, and the empty boat, gaining speed as it approached, seemed to hesitate a moment on the brink; then its nose dipped, and the stern went up like a whale diving, and it whirled down out of sight.

Later, the dramatic-witted Director added a breathless thrill to the film by making an insert-scene of a similar boat shooting over the falls and being smashed into splinters on the seething rocks below.

But the immediate realization of the horror that had come so suddenly upon him completely robbed the Director of his voice, for the time being. Not a thing could be done to save the pair swimming on so easily, all unconscious of the tragedy below them. There was no other boat, and not even a line, supposing for an instant that one could have been thrown so far. Then the dire urgency of the case forced his voice back into his throat in a broken shriek.

"Swim!" he screamed. "For God's sake, swim! The rope's gone! My God! What can we do?"

JEM steadied himself with a swirling backstroke and raised himself out of the water. He understood the situation in an instant, and his quick mind at once grasped the best way to cope with it.

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"Swim now, for all you're worth, girl," he muttered grimly. "There's going to be realism to this picture all right—— No, not that way. We must head up-stream at a good angle to counteract the force of the current. Easy now, and long."

For an instant the girl hung limp on his arm, verging on panic. But the even voice beside her conveyed an indefinable impression of protection, and she pluckily steadied her nerves. For a few moments they struggled on together. Then Jem began to notice that the girl was slowly swerving away from his side.

"Keep it up," he encouraged. "Here, get ahold of this." He slipped his belt.

"Take it in your teeth so you can still use both hands."

He gripped the other end between his own teeth and set his course at the original angle again.

But they had slipped several yards downstream during the little digression, and the girl's strength, in spite of the assistance offered by the belt, was fast giving out. The heavy drag was beginning to tell on Jem. Gradually he was forced out of the diagonal course till he found himself headed straight for the bank .

He could see the white faces slipping by, ever swifter, and could hear horrified shrieks each time the girl was slapped by a wavelet and went under.

He turned desperately to stem the current once again; and then suddenly the drag on his neck ceased, and he shot forward. The exhausted girl had gone under, deep this time, and the belt had slipped from between her nerveless jaws.

She came up, floating limp, several yards farther down. Immediately Jem was after her with a driving overhand stroke, like a water-polo expert on the ball.

"My God! My God!" shrieked Mr. Gresham on the bank.

"My God! My God!" echoed the camera-man, the sweat standing out on his face in beads, but still turning the crank with mechanical rhythm.

"Hold on, girl!" gasped Jem, as he slipped a limp arm over his neck. "We'll make it yet."

But he knew his encouragement was futile; what had been just barely practicable before was now, with this loss of eight or ten yards, beyond the bounds of human possibility. He could already feel the suck of the powerful current.

Then a last desperate chance came to him.

There was a long knife-edge of rock which split the stream for several yards before the falls, and jutted, moss-grown and slimy, over the turmoil below. If he could only make it—and gain any sort of hold in that swirling current! A few feet farther and he would be directly above it.

"Swim, girl," he panted. "Just a little."

"I can't," she murmured. "I'm done."

Then in some inexplicable manner the diverging current whirled them right on to the rock. Jem's heart leaped with a great feeling of thankfulness, and with quick presence of mind he saw that his only hope would be to bestride the edge as he would a saddle. He swirled on to the stone with a jarring bump. The girl's weight swinging past almost wrenched his arms from their sockets and all but dragged him off his precarious leghold. Then slowly he recovered and pulled the inert body in to him.

The members of the company were shrieking hysterically in a horrified group on the bank right opposite, while Mr. Gresham shouted wild advice and vague encouragement.

Jem gathered the girl close and shuffled on to a more secure position. Then he grinned and whistled panting snatches of "Lochaber No More" through his teeth.

"What a picture! God, what a picture!" the camera-man was muttering with twitching face and glaring eyes, as he hopped on one foot behind the crank, which he had never ceased turning, through all the terrific excitement, at the regulation two revolutions per second. Of such stuff are the princes among movie-camera-men.

THE pair were rescued from their predicament by floating the recovered rope down to them and towing them out of danger with one of the automobiles. Jem was almost sorry as he helped the dream-girl ashore, for she had clung very close to him as they crouched overlooking the sudden death below.

"People," Mr. Gresham said weakly, when everybody was once more clothed and in his right mind, "the drinks are on me. I guess we'll make it a holiday for the rest of the day. Not only drinks; the eats are on me. I'll blow the whole bunch to dinner, if Miss DeNeen feels fit for it."

Miss DeNeen surely did. She was a fine, healthy girl, and beyond the unpleasantness

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subsequent to inhaling a large quantity of water, felt very little the worse for her adventure.

Everybody was satisfied with the arrangement except the star—for had not somebody else monopolized the whole limelight to his own complete eclipse? He excused himself ungraciously and sought the seclusion of his home, to brood alone over his wrongs.

The camera-man insisted on getting into the same car with Jem, and put him to inhuman discomfort all the way home with outbursts of:

"Man, but that was a great picture you made! Gorgeous! The sensation of the season!"

"Oh, cut it!" begged Jem. "You've said that just seven times now."

"Yes, yes, I know; but it was fine! Great! I'm goin' home an' pray that the film turns out good — there's no reason why it shouldn't. I stopped her down quite some, and turned like a clock. Man, if you can box like you can swim we'll have *some* film, let me tell you; *some* film!"

"Well, I can't," said Jem shortly.

"Well now——"

A shade crossed the camera-man's face, and he opened his mouth to say something; then he pressed his lips tightly together and looked away, drumming on his beloved box with his fingers.

DURING the ensuing days Jem found himself regarded almost as a distant relative of the family, by all except the star and the girl. The former looked at him poisonously, and it became evident to the discerning that he was possessing his soul in unholy patience. The girl, after thanking him simply for what she called his splendid pluck on her behalf, avoided him strangely. But then, it was noticed that no longer did the Director have to call her and St. Clair to attention when he got to talking business.

In the posing, too, Jem got very little satisfaction, for the scenario now called for the girl to begin showing a preference for the hero after his supposedly noble rescue of her. With the obtuseness of the man of the open places, to whom the ways of women are enigma, Jem pondered ruefully over the irony of these things.

"What are you giggling about now, Edna?" the retroussé girl was constrained to ask.

The observant little philosopher bubbled over.

"Isn't it funny," she rippled, "how things have turned right around? When Helen had to make the goo-goo at Mr. Stuart in the picture, you couldn't separate her from Morton with a derrick; and now that she has to play up to Morton and put Mr. Stuart in cold storage, off scenes you can see her fairly eating him up with her eyes—you watch her when she thinks no one is looking; and if you go near Morton you can hear him cussing horribly all the time."

The saucy one was less observant and more skeptical of the other's deductions, and therefore dying to delve deeper for herself. For what interests a girl more than the meddlings of Cupid—miscalled the beneficent—with the peace of mind of his victims?

Later she found an opportunity to vivisect St. Clair.

"What's the matter with you these days, Morton? Glooms come to live with you?"

Then she added quizzically, "Has Mr. Stuart put your nose out of joint?"

The star snarled at her, and all that he vouchsafed was: "I'll put his out of joint! Just wait; that's all."

Which was not exactly enlightening as to the doings of the malicious god. All that was clear was that the star was not prepossessed in the extra man's favor. But that might well have been because the latter had outshone him, which was quite sufficient with a character of such inflated egoism to account for the ominous reference to the coming slaughter-house scene, which the wily Director was reserving to the very last—when there would be no further necessity for the extra's services.

This was without doubt a cold-blooded plot on the part of the Director; but he was as much an artist as the camera-man, and his whole being was concentrated on the success of his picture.

Concerning all of which Jem was blissfully unconscious as they hurried, urged by insistent demands over the telephone from the office. It was hard work now, and the observant little lady with the sense of humor had not even time to note the perfectly glacial professional impersonality which the heroine put into her love-scenes with St. Clair.

At last there remained only the big scene, the climax in the college gymnasium, for

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which quite a crowd of dollar-fifties had been requisitioned to impersonate enthusiastic students; among whom Jem was delightedly surprised to see his friend Stafford.

"Hello, Wee Jeamie," greeted the irrepressible one. "An' hoo's a' wi' ye the morrn? Broken in and stuck. Eh? Gee, I hadda hold Frankie up with a gun to let me in on this; but I just hadda see you established."

"Established like ——! The foregoing has been play; this is where the real try-out comes; and judging by the line of talk I've heard, he's a man-eater. Frankie'll kill you for steering him up against me if I don't make good in this sparring-match, and he'll never give you another job."

Stafford's face clouded.

"Gee, that'll be savage," he said nervously. "I can't afford to lose the good old stand-by. Jem, you gotta make good! Stamp on'm! Bite him in the leg—— Say, there's the boss hollerin' for you."

Mr. Gresham took Jem and the star to one side.

"Now, boys," he exhorted them, "this is the big scene of the play, and I want you to make it realistic. I don't want any of the piking stuff you see in the usual run of pictures, where the most terrific blow stops a foot away and then gently pushes the other man in the face; and I don't want the ferocious swing that misses by inches and knocks him down by the wind of it. This has got to be a real boxing contest, quick and snappy. That's why I haven't rehearsed it over." Guileful man! "Now you'll need no make-up in this, only costumes; hurry up and change."

He held St. Clair back by the arm.

"Now, look here, Morton," he instructed confidentially, "I want you to let this go about two hundred feet. We all know that you can put him to sleep whenever you want to, but just hold him off till I give you the signal—then you can let yourself go and score a dramatic knock-out."

The Director was surely a cold-blooded artist; and a hint of the existing circumstances, which everybody except Jem seemed to be aware of, began to be whispered among the "supes," who settled themselves enthusiastically to enjoy what promised to be quite an exciting little program.

Jem hurried out of his dressing-box with a towel draped professionally over his shoulders, and was surprised to find Miss DeNeen loitering at the head of the passageway, obviously waiting for him.

"Oh, Mr. Stuart!" she began nervously. "Listen. I—I wanted to tell you—I was hoping some of the men would have warned you, but——"

"Warned me about what?" asked Jem, astonished both at her presence and her manner.

"Oh, about Morton," she continued with a flash of indignation. "You know Mr. Gresham wants this to be realistic—and Morton knocked out all the others who came, and they went right home again—that's why Mr. Gresham wouldn't rehearse you, and—and Morton doesn't like you, and—I think Mr. Gresham should have told you about it."

She concluded with a rather incoherent little rush.

Jem's eyes narrowed to grim slits as he whistled an atrocious bar of discords.

"Hm-m! So that's the whole mystery?" he muttered. "How good is this Morton man?"

"I don't know, but he's simply awfully good," the girl informed him with lucid inaccuracy.

"Hm-m! Thank you very much, Miss DeNeen. Now that I know, I fancy I shall be able to keep away from him for two hundred feet."

In the studio Jem became aware of Stafford making frightful faces at him to attract his attention, but he had no time to make inquiries. The Director had him by the arm.

"Now don't forget, Stuart, I want realism. You go in and do the best you can; St. Clair will look after himself."

Jem grunted—

"D'you mean I've got to fight, really?"

"Sure-ly. Remember you're fighting for the girl." Jim had a dim impression that there was more truth in this than even the Director knew. "Now, quick and snappy, Morton. I don't like the expression on your face; remember you're the cool and confident hero now; revenge isn't in your system."

The admonition was necessary. St. Clair was looking like a victorious gladiator waiting for the thumbs to go down.

"NOW then! All ready?—Camera!"

"The best you can"—Jem had learned early in life that the best defense lay in attack. He stepped in like

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light, feinted, and swung both hands—and was amazed to find them both land clean and heavy. The star was evidently unprepared for such suddenness. He snarled and crouched, planning vengeance.

Jem remembered the advice of a battered old professional, "When the other man thinks, you hit." He leaped in and hit, straight with the left to the face, and followed with a heavy right-left to the body. Again he was astonished to find all three of his blows land without opposition.

St. Clair's head had snapped back, and a thin smear of red tinged his upper lip.

Jem stepped back and circled, wondering whether this was a "stall," and if so, admiring the sacrifice that the other was prepared to make for the sake of the picture. *He* was thinking this time; and St. Clair rushed in, swinging furiously, and bore him back to the ropes.

Jem recovered his balance with the rope touching his back, and then stood toe to toe and slugged. The other man was taller and heavier, but this kind of fighting suited Jem, and he found himself coming in with heavy, short smashes that drew sharp grunts from his opponent. Slowly the rope left his back, and he began to win to the center of the ring. Then a flush hit landed on his cheek and he went down.

The "supes" were howling in their seats and jostling one another to get a better view; behaving, in fact, just as interested partizans should do.

"Fine!" shouted Mr. Gresham. "Not too hard yet, St. Clair."

The camera-man hopped on both feet with his eyes blazing, and ate up a whole bunch of toothpicks while he counted, "Eighty-five—ninety—ninety-five," with monotonous regularity.

Jem was grinning now. His breath hissed through his teeth with a vague rhythm. He was beginning to realize that he could make quite a showing.

St. Clair rushed in again to take advantage of his knock-down, entirely oblivious of the Director's instructions about prolonging the film. His despised rival had hit him about almost as he pleased—of course he had been taken by surprise—and he was now bent on savage retaliation.

No ropes against Jem's back this time! He ducked swiftly under the swinging arms, and began the heavy *rip! bang! thud!* of the natural in-fighter. Presently his opponent stepped back to gasp for breath.

It was just the proper distance. *Smash!* Full over his left ear. *Smash!* Again. St. Clair reeled away with a pained, bewildered look on his face.

Some one laughed. Some one who knew and understood. Vaguely St. Clair comprehended that the laugh was against him; and the realization acted on him like strong brandy. Ridicule! Of *him!*

He bit his teeth together and rushed in, to be met with a heavy crash on the side of the neck which sent him to the boards.

"Oh, splendid! Magnificent indeed!" shouted the Director. He was getting a gorgeous film. "We'll call that, 'Saved by the Bell.' "

The star was assisted dazedly to his feet, and the Director purred over him.

"That's just glorious, my boy! We're getting *the* picture of the season. Now then, when I give you the signal you can go in and finish it—as soon as you're ready."

In his excitement the Director's mind still clung to his preëstablished estimate of the star's prowess.

"I'm ready," grated St. Clair thickly through his choking rage; and rushed in to the contest again, raving, berserk.

Jem weathered the storm, ducking, slipping, and grinning all over; and St. Clair snarled around him with an expression not at all like the prescribed hero of the nickelodeons.

" 'Dred 'n' eighty—'n' eighty-five," droned the camera-man.

"Now then, Morton!" shouted the Director.

Desperately the star responded in a wild attempt to recover his shattered reputation. He bunched himself together and leaped in—straight into a right glove, circling like a yellow arc of light.

ST. CLAIR shuddered back to life with the abomination of desolation ringing insistently in his ears. He struggled to a sitting position and concentrated his dazed faculties on the sound. He recognized it now; it was laughter. Ribald mirth—then something snapped in his brain. He staggered to his feet and lurched like a heroin-victim to his dressing-room, without passing a word to anybody, and with a face like a lost soul.

"Oh, glory be! What a picture!" the camera-man babbled, weeping with joy over

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his instrument. "Say, boy, I thought you said you couldn't fight?"

"No more I can," maintained Jem. "But I understood St. Clair could. I've sparred with Curly Dixon, and Jem Burke, and some others at the club back home—and they could walk all over me any time."

"Gosh! Why, those are professionals, man!" quavered the camera-man, marveling at the naive modesty of Jem's comparison.

Going to the water-filter Jem passed by the dream girl, whose big eyes were still staring as if in a dream.

"You're wonderful!" she faltered.

"Thanks to your warning," he jested back.

And then St. Clair came from his room, dressed for the street, and almost cringing from view.

The Director just saw him as he was opening the door.

"Hey, St. Clair, you can't go home yet; the picture isn't finished," he called cheerfully.

"To —— with the picture!" the other flared with bloodshot eyes and an expression of utter desolation.

The Director recoiled. He didn't understand. Then he ran and caught the actor by the sleeve.

"But say, the picture isn't finished right," he objected solicitously. "We'll have to do that last part over again."

"Over again!"

St. Clair tore his sleeve free, turned and just glowered at the Director, with lips quivering back from the teeth at the corners.

Then the Director understood; and the camera-man understood; and so did many others.

The star's colossal vanity, which was a part of his being, reared and fostered by public adulation, had been wounded, rent, lacerated. He could never face that company again. Argument or entreaty was futile, and the Director knew it. He turned to the camera-man, paralyzed by this catastrophe, which, to him, was a world disaster.

"Good gosh!" he whispered hoarsely. "The picture! They must have it in two more days; and we've spent over two thousand dollars!" and he flopped into a chair.

The camera-man just bowed his head on his machine and moaned. Those wonderful films were to be useless.

Stafford softly drew Jem away.

"Jeamie," he murmured sorrowfully, "in just a couple of minutes you're goin' to be without a job once more; an' that although you've made good—too good. This is where you step right back to your normal an' become a student of literature again—want-ads. Two thousand bones you've cost him; d'you hear it? There's only one consolation; you didn't fall down on Frankie, an' he'll give us a job again."

And the general consensus endorsed Stafford's opinion to the full.

MEANWHILE the Director had taken hold of his shattered senses with the quick energy of mind that had won him his position; and he sat thinking swiftly, turning the situation around and attacking it from every possible angle. Presently he looked up and beckoned to Jem.

"Your walking-ticket," murmured Stafford.

"Well, young man," began the Director grimly, "you've got me into a fine hole."

"You can't blame me, Mr. Gresham," defended Jem. "You know what you told me yourself about wading in. How was I to know that he was so fragile?"

"Yes, yes, I know; I'd fire you all the same if it would help my picture one atom. But we've spent too much on it, and this scene and the river one are too good to lose; so I'm going to take a bold step and save the film by featuring you in it. I can see how the whole story can be changed by putting in some new scenes and changing some of the headlines. We must go over Scene Nine again, just the part where St. Clair jumps into the river and where he pulls her out, and make *you* the hero all the way through."

And he fell to discussing and rearranging his plans with the camera-man.

Charles James Stuart addressed a postcard to his uncle and printed three words on it in large Roman characters, just as another great invader had done before him:

VENI. VIDI. VICI.

Which, being interpreted, is: "I came. I saw. I conquered."

A little later Mr. Gresham got up with a radiant face — the revised scenario-plot, with those two sensational scenes to back it, had worked out strong—and called for Stuart and Miss DeNeen to give them their new instructions.

"They've gone out to lunch together," gurgled a voice through which a delicious giggle rippled.

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The Sinews of War

A Two-Part Story. Part One.

by

Arthur D. Howden Smith

CHAPTER I

A COMPARTMENT ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS

THE Austrian Customs official was manifestly reluctant to return my passport. He looked from it to me, and from me to it; and asked me the same series of absurd personal questions at least twice.

"And you say you are going to Sofia merely on pleasure?" he questioned finally.

"Yes," I answered with wary courtesy.

"Sofia has never been a favorite with tourists, monsieur," he went on in his cursed Teutonic French.

"It may be a favorite with me," I replied in an unwary moment.

He glanced up quickly.

"Ah! Then monsieur has been to Sofia before?"

"Not at all. Monsieur is simply a man

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who is willing to see a part of the world that other men have passed by."

I lied glibly and in desperation, as a man must lie when he sees fate hauling its meshes closer about him. The official surveyed me with a doubtful expression which he was at scant pains to conceal. Once more he perused the passport, with the coat of arms of the United States spread broad across it, and at the bottom the signature of his Excellency, the Secretary of State, the Hon. Philander C. Knox.

"Your name is given as Walter C. Wetherell," he remarked, phrasing the implied question with open insinuation. "Have you any other means of identification about you?"

For a moment I thought of blustering my way out, but another moment's consideration convinced me that such a course would be worse than useless. The man in front of me I had never seen before, but knew that his persistent inquisitiveness must be backed by some comprehensive knowledge of the facts. All the way from Paris I had suspected that I was being shadowed, but not once had I been able to pick out my invisible companion from the heterogeneous crowd of tourists, commercial men, diplomats and touts who make up the regular complement of the Orient Express.

"Why do you wish to know?" I parried desperately, at the same time glancing up and down the station platform. All of the other passengers, their inspections finished, had climbed back aboard the long train. It was early morning, just after dawn, and the church tower of the scraggly village of Semlin was gilded by the rising sun, the rays of which were beginning to glint back from the turgid waters of the Danube and the lower tiers of houses of Belgrade, the Servian capital, on the farther side.

"Why do I wish to know?" echoed my persecutor. "Ah, but monsieur must know that we have to be very careful as to the identity of people who leave the Emperor-King's dominions."

Again I glanced up and down the track. A wild thought leaped into my head to try the railroad bridge, but instantly I perceived the lines of sentries and the futility of such an attempt; a Mannlicher ball through the head would be my reward. Apparently my inquisitor half divined my thoughts, for he carelessly raised his arm, and at the gesture a couple of the soldiers drew nearer. It was too bad! The idea of being arrested with safety almost in sight! I ground my teeth in impotent rage—and like a streak an idea came to me.

"You say you want additional identification?" I asked carelessly.

"Yes."

"Well, it's a great shame that a harmless American citizen should be used like this," I grumbled. "But if you must have it, I suppose you must. You'll have to come to my compartment, though."

The unexpectedness of the proposition dazed the fellow for an instant, I think.

"Very well, monsieur," he said finally. "Lead on."

And without any more words we walked rapidly toward the car containing my quarters. Out of the tail of my eye I could see that the soldiers who had been hanging around ever since the Customs man accosted me were drawing in after us. At the steps of the platform I stopped.

"After you, monsieur," I said courteously.

Mechanically the man bowed and started to mount the step. But I gripped the back of his neck with one hand, gave it a twist that I remembered from school-days, and hurled him in a paralyzed heap on the ground. Then, before any of the sentries could fire—indeed, before any of them fully sensed what had happened—I dived under the car, came out on the other side, and ran as fast as I could down the embankment toward the river.

It was not very far, and as I ran I twisted out of the light overcoat I had on.

RIGHT in front of me and almost in the shadow of the railroad bridge, a bare couple of hundred yards away, a peasant was shoving a skiff into the river. I made for him, shouting at the top of my voice. At first the fellow did not hear me, and when he did he stopped pushing and stared at me with his mouth open.

"Shove off, man! Shove off!" I panted as I came up to him.

As I spoke a rifle cracked, and a tiny whiff of white smoke blew up from the railroad embankment.

"Shove off!" I repeated.

"Why should I?" returned the peasant sullenly. "What are you—a murderer?"

"I'm nothing of the kind," I said, reaching

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for my revolver. Minutes were precious, and I was determined to waste no time arguing.

"Is it politics?" asked the fellow.

"Yes!" I snapped. "And for God's sake hurry, or——"

I pulled out the pistol.

"That's enough," he answered readily enough. "You need say no more. Give us a hand."

Together we ran the boat out into the water in no time, and tumbled in. There were two pairs of oars, and I seized one pair. As the oars caught, the soldiers who were running from the embankment fired twice, but they were winded by their efforts and the shots went wide. With great, soul-breaking strokes we launched out into the stream, encountered the force of the current, and speedily were carried downstream, away from the abutment of the bridge.

Seeing us rapidly getting out of their reach, the soldiers dropped to their knees and fired at us more methodically, sending a hail of nickel-tipped lead that flitted all about us, skimming the wavelets, and one or two of them nicking the oars. Evidently, though, this disturbance was more than the authorities had bargained on, and presently the soldiers desisted. I dare say Austria wasn't any too anxious to advertise that she had failed again.

The thought of this made me chuckle, and the boatman, who was seated in front of me, glanced quickly over his shoulder.

"You don't seem to mind danger," he remarked.

"No," I answered; "nor you either, my friend."

"Oh, anything to outwit the —— Austrians," he answered indifferently.

I glanced at him more closely. Why, surely, the fellow was a Slav, beyond a doubt—and a Serb, judging by the long head of him!

"*Boze Slavonski*," I murmured, trying him with the password of the vast Pan-Slav society which has branches all over southeastern Europe.

The fellow dropped his oars.

"*Brol!*" he gasped.

I nodded.

"I'm glad the good gold napoleons that are coming to you for this job will go to a brother in the work."

"Oh, that's all right," he muttered. "I don't take pay from a brother."

There was a pause, during which neither of us spoke. We had begun to make headway now against the tide, and the steeples and house-roofs of Belgrade, with the mass of the old citadel hulking high over all, were drawing nearer. Turning, I could make out the wharves along the river-front; and presently a mournful whistle on the opposite side of the river proclaimed that the Orient Express at last had started out of Semlin.

"It's a good job I found you," I remarked.

"Yes," replied the boatman. Then he hesitated shyly. "Would you mind—— Is it permitted, *brot*, to ask thy name?"

"It is," I said, "although the knowledge of it must be secret. I am Daniel E. Blair."

Well, I might as well admit that I'm sufficiently human to feel pleasure when another human being shows he's glad that I'm alive. It gave me a bit of a thrill when the fellow turned square around and looked at me, mouth agape.

"Not—not the Guspodine Blair of America?"

"Just that."

I thought he was going to kiss my hand, and that's one thing I can't stand; so I called a halt.

"We must be hurrying, *brot*," I warned. "I must catch that train before it pulls out of the Belgrade station."

He resumed his oars, and bent to the task of driving the clumsy boat through the water.

"Oh, you'll make it, never fear," he grunted through clinched teeth.

At the wharf edge I hauled out a fistful of gold pieces and handed them to him.

"Here," I said, "you've earned these. Not a man in the Organization would question it."

But he drew himself proudly erect and pushed the boat away from the place where I stood.

"I don't want your money, Guspodine Blair," he returned. "I've heard of you. I know what you did for us in Macedonia in 1907, and I have a suspicion what you are going to do now. But that's your secret, and you can rely on Sasha Kroyevich to the death."

"All right, Sasha," I said. "So be it."

With that, we saluted each other, and I turned and went quickly up the narrow streets of the old town toward the railroad station of Belgrade. At the station gate I

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showed my ticket and smilingly accosted the whiskered and be-medaled sleeping-car guard, who looked as if he had seen a ghost from the gray Danube.

"I don't suppose you've let my compartment yet, have you?" I demanded. "I had a reservation to Sofia. Sorry I couldn't cross the river with you. But you saw what happened."

"Yes—yes—yes, monsieur!" he sputtered. "But—but—but——"

"Exactly," I answered soothingly. "It's all a question of buts, monsieur. The fact of the matter is, I'm a political; and I came very near being laid by the heels back there at Semlin, but I wasn't. And I don't know of any regulation of the State railroads of Servia which forbids a man from resuming the place in a train from which he has been held by illegitimate force."

Saying which I climbed aboard the car and sought my compartment. If he wanted to make a row about it, well and good.

As I had expected, my compartment had been turned inside out, and the dummy dispatch-box that I knew had been ransacked once before we reached Semlin, had disappeared entirely. Probably they were going to look for ciphers. I chuckled. They must think me a fool, in all sincerity.

Would any man who was acquainted with Austrian diplomacy, crossed with the guile of the Osmanli, and who knew that he had incurred the everlasting enmity of the two most desperate Powers in southeastern Europe, lay himself open to the most barefaced pawings of their spies? I laughed again. But I stopped laughing when my mirth was returned from the compartment's doorway.

CHAPTER II

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE

I LOOKED up into a smiling oval face, the faultless frame for a pair of great, childlike brown eyes, the whole surmounted by masses of soft brown hair. She was a mighty pretty woman, was Hélène von Anhalt; but I had known her in the past, in the time of her late husband, when he was Austria's representative at the Bulgarian capital—and Heaven send I shall never be the kind of man who can tag at a woman's apron-strings after he has found out what she is capable of!

Maybe something of this was mirrored in my face as I looked at her. At any rate, the smile on her face changed to a pout.

"You don't seem overjoyed at the sight of me, Monsieur Blair," she remarked.

I rose leisurely to my feet.

"You were always unfair, Countess," I answered. "There was Bobby Cartwright——"

She paled to the temples, and one hand rose to her throat in a gesture of appeal—that is, I should have thought it meant appeal had any one but Hélène von Anhalt made it. I felt conscience-stricken. It was a rotten affair, that story of the poor little attaché of the British Ministry who had been found in the Prince's gardens with the empty pistol clutched in his hand; and I suppose a man might as well let the dark spots in a woman's life die out of her memory. But I was feeling wrathy over the disturbance of my journey and my treatment at the hands of the Austrian authorities in Semlin, and I had a shrewd suspicion that Madame the Countess was at the bottom of the trouble.

"You are not very gentle, sir," she said presently, when she had regained control of herself. "Nobody regretted poor Mr. Cartwright's death more than I did."

There she spoke the truth, and I knew it.

"I did not mean to hurt you, Countess," I answered as gently as I could. "Let us forget the remark. It is an unexpected pleasure to find you my traveling companion."

"Yes?" she answered negligently. "And how far are you going?"

I could not avoid a fleeting smile.

"To Sofia. And you?"

"Also Sofia. I am going to visit Madame von Schellenburg, the minister's wife."

"What a splendid chance to look up old friends!" I commented. "You must be looking forward to it."

"One must fill in one's time," she returned with a trace of weariness. "And you, Monsieur Blair; is this your first visit to Bulgaria since——"

I nodded.

"How surprised they will be to see us come together!" she remarked with an attempt at raillery.

Words seemed superfluous, and I merely shrugged my shoulders.

"And you are still without a wife?" she

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remarked presently, seeing that I made no attempt to carry on the conversation.

"Even so."

"Strange!" she murmured. "Do the women still throw themselves at your head as they used to do?"

"You are pleased to be facetious, madame," I replied coldly. She was ever noted for her spicy tongue.

"I facetious?" She laughed mockingly. "How can you say so? Haven't I always taken you seriously? At any rate, my husband thought so."

Now that was going a bit too far. The episode she spoke of had been a most disagreeable one, one for which I had not been in the least to blame. It had been simply a diabolical effort on the part of Hélène, for reasons of her own, to involve me in a duel with her husband that could only have resulted in the poor old man's death. Her recalling of it was lacking in taste, to say the least.

"That is a matter which I don't like to think of, Countess, and which I should think you would do well to forget," I answered sternly.

She flushed.

"I am not accustomed to such language, monsieur."

Again I shrugged my shoulders.

She smiled sweetly.

"This conversation might have been lifted bodily out of one of those days five years ago," she said. "We've fallen into the old rut without any difficulty."

"It was not of my seeking, madame."

"Now you're cross again!" she chided. "Well, it's too late for you to have me put off, at any rate."

In fact, the train was already moving slowly through the railroad yards on the first stage of the journey to Sofia.

"It's a rather long train, Countess," I returned with a smile, having made up my mind not to be disagreeable, "and I dare say you can keep away from me if you want to."

I thought she flinched; but she came back at me smartly.

"Quite right. But if we do meet—beware!"

And with that, and a mocking smile that yet seemed to contain some hidden menace, she disappeared down the corridor of the swaying car. I slipped over to the door at once and marked her progress to a compartment near the other end. It was more than mysterious that Hélène von Anhalt should happen to be traveling on the same train and in the same car with me to Sofia. It was particularly sinister, in view of my experience at Semlin.

Mind you, I knew her for one of the cleverest spies in the Austrian service, feared and dreaded in every capital in Europe. It was she who had really represented the Double-headed Eagle in Sofia—not her doddering old husband.

What could be the game? Obviously the Austrians, informed of my journey and its probable object by their Secret Service operatives, had determined to do everything to uncover my plans if they were unable to detain me on some false charge, a *coup* that would have caused me a delay which might have been fatal. Hélène, because of her acquaintance with me in the past and her intricate knowledge of Balkan politics and intrigues, had probably been in charge of my surveillance and the final effort to lay me by the heels in Semlin. When this had failed, she must have made up her mind to follow me herself. But was she alone? This thought puzzled me.

Of course she would have a maid with her; but from what I knew of her she would also be likely to have one or two of her cleverest agents. With this idea in my mind I walked out into the corridor, making a bluff at observing the Servian countryside, but really availing myself of the opportunity to peer into the compartments on each side of me.

One was vacant. The other contained a ruddy-faced Englishman of middle age, clad in loose tweeds and a loud cap, and a slim, well built man, who looked Italian and might have been Greek. Both were reading; and as I glanced in, the latter raised his eyes to mine for a moment in a look of casual interest. There seemed nothing to be suspicious of there, and I returned to my own compartment, stifling a yawn as I entered.

I was beastly tired. All the night before I had not slept for fear that an attempt might be made to kidnap me at some waystation; and the incident of the morning had sapped the remainder of my strength. I felt of the tiny automatic in my pocket, pulled down the shades at the window, threw my shawl over me, and curled up on one of the seats for a nap, reckoning to awake

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about the time we stopped at Nisch for water and to let the express from Constantinople pass us. I must have been asleep inside of two minutes.

HOW long I slept I don't know, but I woke up with a feeling of suffocation. My head was dizzy, and the swaying of the car over the rough roadbed was accentuated by this feeling until it seemed as if we were rolling like a ship at sea.

The dim interior of the compartment swam before my eyes, but I could vaguely perceive two men moving about, and a faint odor as of some delicate perfume was wafted to my nostrils from an indistinct object by the door into the corridor. Beside me on the seat lay a damp handkerchief whence reeked the oppressive odor of chloroform. What had happened? I lay inert, summoning every energy to bring back my full self-possession.

And gradually I began to make out parts of a whispered conversation between the figures that moved restlessly about me in an unstable atmosphere that danced before my eyes like a star-world in the making.

"No use, I tell you," came a voice speaking in German, with a queer Asiatic accent.

"I tell you, they may have bungled," replied a snarly Teutonic voice. "Give me that bag. Did you——"

The object by the door moved closer and hissed something low.

"Yes, yes," answered the rumbling Teuton voice. "Every pocket. Only this."

He held up my pistol. The realization of the indignity of a bodily search was just the thing I needed to revive my drugged faculties. The blood commenced to pump through my brain at express speed, and I warily moved one leg to discover if they had left me unshackled. Yes, I was free.

The shapeless object by the door commenced to whisper again, and I strained my ears to try to overhear a single word. I was beginning to suspect who it was, and if I could catch Hélène von Anhalt in any trick like this—— Well, it would please me more than anything else. Besides, I was thoroughly indignant at the liberty that had been taken with my person. They must be desperate to go to such extremes—and in Servia, too, where a word from me would lodge them all in a fortress!

"Not a thing." I caught the voice with the Asiatic accent. Evidently the Sultan was working with the Emperor-King in this little deal. Then with impatience, the Turk—for such I was convinced the man was—broke out——

"Do you think a man of his experience would——"

In his exasperation he had raised his voice, and the figure by the door said, "Ssh!" in unmistakably feminine tones. So I was right. Hélène von Anhalt was engineering the enemy's game. It was too much.

I knew just where the electric switch was situated above the opposite seat of the compartment, and in the gloom I measured the distance. The man who spoke German like a German was in the way; but that only added zest to my plan. Besides, he had my gun, and I intended to get it back. They had started to whisper again, and no one was paying any attention to me as I lay, apparently a helpless figure, under the heavy traveling-rug, steeped in chloroform.

With a single bound I gained my feet, and the impetus of my leap sufficed to knock down the man with the pistol. One of my hands was locked around the wrist of his hand which contained the weapon, and I wrung it unmercifully. He dropped the pistol with a groan almost before his companions comprehended what had happened, and I seized it from the couch, at the same time pinning him to the cushions with one knee and fumbling for the electric switch. As I found it and the light blazed down upon our dazzled eyes, there was a shrill scream, and my feminine visitor glided out of the door into the corridor before I could get even a glimpse of her face.

But when the second man would have dodged after her I was too quick for him. Still holding down my first quarry with my knee and the hand I had released from the switch, I threatened him with the pistol and told him to stay where he was—which was with one hand on the door-knob.

"On second thoughts, you might sit down, monsieur," I added. "No, not there. Over here by the window—and please put up the shade. The light is better."

As I looked at him I was surprised to see that he was the slim, dark fellow who had been sitting in the next compartment, and whom I had taken for an Italian or a Greek. He accepted the situation very coolly; which was more than could be said for his friend, who wriggled about like an eel until

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finally I was obliged to threaten to knock him on the head with the pistol-butt. When he subsided I was not at all surprised to discover him to be the ruddy-faced "British tourist" who had been the other inmate of the next compartment.

Having reduced him to complaisance with the situation, I shoved him over into the window-corner opposite his friend, and myself took a position by the door. He said nothing, being seemingly occupied in a readjustment of his attire, which had been considerably rumpled in our brief encounter. The other fellow, who had not shown a trace of confusion throughout the affair, simply sat back in his corner and smiled at me.

"Well, gentlemen," I said, "what am I to call this? Robbery?"

"Look in your pockets, monsieur," replied the dark chap. "I don't think you'll find anything missing."

"That's all very well," I answered. "You weren't able to go far enough."

"Nonsense!" exploded the other spy. "What proof have you got? Nobody has seen us in here, save yourself."

"And a certain feminine friend of yours," I returned significantly. "But I think you are mistaken about my inability to do you harm, monsieur. I am known in Servia, and a word from me to the authorities in Nisch would suffice to make things most unpleasant for you."

The Austrian started to bluster again, but before he had gone far his companion interfered.

"Monsieur is quite right," he said, looking at me with a pleasant smile. "I dare say he could make things most unpleasant for us. But I don't see what monsieur would gain by it. It would require time, and I think time means a good deal to monsieur just now."

Candidly, the fellow took me. He was clean-cut. The Austrian was—well, he was what we call a mucker, the sort of fellow who gets cashiered from his regiment and picks up the spy-game because he has the wits of a sharper and the stomach for dirty business. But this Turk was of a different caliber.

"That's right, my friend," I answered. "What's your name?"

"You really wish to know?" he asked amusedly.

"Yes," I replied. "And you might as well give me the right one. If you're frank with me I'll make things easier for you."

He bowed pleasantly.

"Monsieur is very kind. I am called Kemil Bey."

I could not help a whistle of surprise.

"Your great-uncle is the Grand Vizier, isn't he?"

He nodded.

"Your people must be very anxious to get me, if they send you on such business."

"I am glad that you take it as a compliment," he said with a faint smile.

"It's not a compliment to you," I said bluntly—and he blushed.

"It is work for my country," he said quietly.

I couldn't deny that, so I turned to the other fellow.

"Now you can tell me your name and instructions or not, as you see fit," I warned him sharply. "If you tell me the truth I'll let you off easily. If you don't I'll have you arrested at Nisch, and it will be a long time before you see Vienna again—no matter how much valuable time I may lose in doing it."

"My name is Carl von Griffenstein," he replied sullenly. "As for my instructions, common intelligence will tell you what they were."

NOW this fellow von Griffenstein had been a notorious bully in his day, one of the deadliest swordsmen in the Austrian Army. He had been broken after a series of pernicious duels, fought, it was claimed, for payment by enemies of the men he killed. I knew him well by reputation. Of course he spoke the truth about his instructions. I knew they must have been simply to follow me and get any evidence there might be about me, at any cost.

"I suppose you are booked to Sofia?" I asked.

They both nodded.

"Well, messieurs," I said after a moment's reflection, "I regret to say that I think I shall have to let you go. But on one condition—that you leave the train at Nisch. If you attempt to proceed I shall have you arrested. Do you agree?"

There wasn't anything else for them to do, and they both assented—von Griffenstein with an angry growl, the Turk with a humorous air of self-raillery.

"Very well, then," I said. "I think you may go, gentlemen."

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The Austrian went out first, without a word, his face a study in baffled rage. But as Kemil Bey passed me he offered his hand.

"Do you mind shaking hands, monsieur?" he asked. "I enjoyed that little fight very much. You are the kind of man I appreciate fencing with."

"Not at all, monsieur," I returned.

"To our next meeting," he responded. And as he entered his compartment he glanced over his shoulder and said laughingly, "Today to thee, tomorrow to me—eh?"

CHAPTER III

ONE CHANCE LOST

THROUGHOUT the rest of the run to Nisch I saw no more of the two spies or of Hélène von Anhalt. Indeed, even after Nisch had been passed and we had crossed the frontier into Bulgaria, madame clung to her compartment; which rather surprised me. She was always inclined toward sociability. It was not until we were crawling into the long yellow station at Sofia, as the sun was dropping behind the mountains that ring the wide valley in which the city stands, that she came from her room into the corridor where all the other passengers were grouped.

I started to go up to her, but was deterred by the hasty little bow she gave me and a manifest look of dismay on her face. Somewhat amused, I turned my attention to collecting my much-handled baggage for the porters to look after. Could Hélène be conscience-stricken over what she had done? The idea seemed incredible. But even as I dismissed it and started to make my way toward the door I felt a light touch on my arm, and turned to look into those confoundedly childlike brown eyes.

"I hope you will pardon me," she said humbly. "I—I—— Did they hurt you?"

"Did who hurt me?" I answered as if puzzled.

"Oh, you know," she flung back. "What's the use of pretending—when I give myself away like this? You know whom I mean!"

"If you refer to the comic-opera bandits who raided my compartment this morning—no, Countess," I replied.

"I'm glad," she said simply. "Please believe that I did not wish any harm to come to you."

This was too much for my sense of humor, and I burst out laughing.

"Really? But how could I doubt the assertion for a minute?"

"One has one's duty to do," she answered, flushing. "And you are a hard man to fight against, Monsieur Blair. One must resort to desperate measures."

"I am flattered," I returned ironically. "But I appreciate your words in the spirit they are meant, madame; and we will cry quits—for the time being."

A minute later I was fighting my way across the station between excited peasants, overloaded porters, and big, strapping, dark-faced gendarmes. One of these men I recognized as an old acquaintance, and him I called to. He remembered me at once and, shouting my name, rushed to my side, knocking people right and left in his progress.

"Ah, guspodine, what joy to see you again! Your bag—where is it? Here, son of a pig—" this to the porter—"make haste with his excellency's baggage! You seek a carriage, guspodine? But what joy to see you back in Bulgaria! We have often heard of the great Guspodine Danilo Blair, who makes gold of everything he breathes upon, since you left us five years ago."

He was a good, simple-hearted fellow, one of many who had been faithful friends to me in adventurous times past; and I'll admit it seemed good to get his hearty welcome. Pressing along at his heels, I passed through the station into the wide crescent behind it, where the carriages and public equipages drew up. Here he was about to signal to a driver when again I heard my name called, this time by a feminine voice. I looked around to find Hélène von Anhalt standing all alone in front of a pile of luggage.

"Oh, monsieur!" she cried. "What shall I do? I had expected some one from the Ministry to meet me, and no one is here. I can not conceive what has possessed Madame von Schellenburg. What had I better do?"

It seemed odd that Hélène von Anhalt, as capable a little woman as ever traveled alone, a proficient linguist, and more than ordinarily familiar with Sofia, should be in need of my aid. But I couldn't see that it would do any harm to gratify what might be a perfectly natural feminine desire to be coddled, so I instructed Giorgi, my

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gendarme, to stay by my luggage, and sauntered over to her.

"A desperate situation, Countess!" I commented teasingly. "All alone in a strange city, eh?"

"You are horrid!" she answered, making a *moue* at me. "Can't a woman enjoy making a man look after her—even if she is as old as a grandmother and homely as a hedge fence?"

"Ah, not that; not that!"

"Well, then, even if the man detests her—— Oh, you needn't protest! I have eyes. And after all, it's more fun, possibly, to make a man who doesn't like one run around."

"Very possibly," I returned dryly. She seemed anxious to open an extended conversation, and I had no leisure for such pastime. "I'm not experienced in the realm of feminine psychology. But now what can I do for you, Countess? Have you all your baggage?"

"No—— Yes, here comes my maid with the last of it. I want to go to the ministry. Can you find me a *voiture?*"

"Surely; with pleasure."

I hailed the nearest cabby in Bulgarian not a whit better than madame could speak herself.

"Here you are," I said as he wheeled up beside us. "To the Austrian ministry," I told him as I handed her in.

"You've been very sweet, Monsieur Blair," she said, with an almost proprietary air.

"I don't know how to thank you. It's so nice to be looked after so thoroughly by one's enemy."

"I'm sure it must be," I agreed enthusiastically. "By the way, don't let the man overcharge you. It's a franc to the ministry—only, in Bulgaria, they call a franc a lion."

The sarcasm passed over her head.

"You're so thoughtful," she murmured. "I'd ask you to call—only——"

She paused significantly and extended her hand. Why I did it I don't know, but I bent over it as reverentially as a confessed lover.

"Good-by, Countess."

"*Au revoir*, Monsieur Blair, and—bad luck to you!"

I gazed after her with a decidedly perplexed mind. What in the name of the tutelar saints of diplomacy had the woman been up to? I was not a feather-headed boy, to be——

A resounding thump between the shoulder-blades that all but brought me to my knees abruptly diverted my attention. Swinging about on my heel with full intent to slay the offender, I gazed squarely into the eyes of Major Boris Kurtsky, of the Tirnovo Cavalry Regiment—one of the best friends a man ever had and a very noble gentleman. He gripped my hand in his and wrung it as if his life depended on it.

"Dear old man!" he exclaimed in the English he had learned at Robert College on the Bosphorus—quaint, precisely clipped English, a great deal better than you are likely to hear in America. "Dear old man! So you've come back after all?"

The thought of the five years that had passed since we had last seen each other and of all the changes they had brought made both of us feel a bit groggy, and it was several seconds before I felt like answering. Then, as I started to speak, my eyes happened to glance over his shoulder, and I—I——

They just stayed there.

IT WAS a girl—a girl like none I had ever seen, a girl with ruddy-gold hair that seemed to be sifting the last rays of the sunset, and making them the brighter and ruddier for it; with eyes of a deep purplish blue, and a face that might have been chiseled out of marble. She was sitting only a few feet from where we were standing, at the steering-wheel of a slim blue roadster, one arm leaning on the side. And her eyes, which were fastened on me, looked disapproval, while her face was a mixture of interest and disdain. She met my glance haughtily for a moment; then a rosy flush climbed slowly up her face and she busied herself with her machine.

Presently she thrust in the clutch, tooted the horn, and with a half nod in response to Boris' salute spun nimbly around the crescent and out into the road that led to the city.

"Who is she?" I demanded of Boris, who was standing chuckling at my discomfiture.

"Masoya Vavaroff. But you've lost your chance, old fellow—lost it before you got it. She doesn't approve of you—as you seem to have realized."

"I couldn't very well help it, could I?" I

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returned, rather nettled. "But what's she got against me?"

"Why, we saw you talking with the Anhalt," returned Boris imperturbably. "What the dickens was the matter with you, Dan? You never would have fallen for anything like that in the old days. Don't you know how that woman stands here?"

In a flash I understood. So this was why Hélène von Anhalt had been so anxious to advertise my devotion in public! What won't a woman do to make another woman think a man belongs to her? I chuckled at the idea. It was funny, any way you looked at it. But Boris did not seem to approve of my mirth.

"Aye, you may laugh!" he said. "But it was foolish to dance attendance on Hélène von Anhalt like that in Sofia."

"My dear Boris," I replied, "I probably have fewer illusions about Hélène von Anhalt than any man you know. As a matter of fact, she has been shadowing me—but we will talk of that later. Who is Masoya Vavaroff?"

Boris threw back his head and laughed—a great, boisterous dragoon-laugh that was good to hear.

"Well, well! And this is my old friend, Mr. Daniel E. Blair, capitalist, financier, and nation-builder! Since when have you been interested in the petticoats, Dan? I spent all my time there with Masoya, trying to clear your character by asseverations of your past austerity. But she couldn't see it in light of your manifest devotion."

I was beginning to be put out.

"Nonsense! It was a game. She was playing for the effect. You know the way all women are, always keen for a chance to make people think they have a man at their heels."

Boris laughed the harder.

"A game, eh? Well, man, it was a game, I fear, that has cost you at least the temporary affection of Masoya Vavaroff. 'And is this your famous Mr. Blair?' says she. 'Is this the man we are to pin our faith on?' But of what use are words? You saw."

"Yes, I saw," I answered impatiently. "And if it's necessary I suppose I shall be able to get along without your friend Miss Vavaroff. But who is she? You say she is one of us?"

"Most emphatically," returned Boris, evidently answering my last question first. "Masoya Vavaroff comes pretty close to being the most powerful woman in the kingdom these days. But come! Let's be getting your things together, and pile into a *voiture*. I'm ordered to bring you to my uncle's house. We'll talk on the way."

"How is your uncle?" I asked, as soon as we were free of the congestion of traffic about the station.

"The confidential minister is as well as ever," was Boris' light reply. "Always bearing the fate of the nation on his shoulders, immersed in the details of loans in the millions—francs, not dollars, though, old chap—and inclined to think I take life entirely too easily."

"I'll dispute with him on that last point," I answered, for I knew the real man under Boris' dandified exterior. "You've never proved untrustworthy in the hour of trial, and I fancy you never will."

"Thanks," he said, and squeezed my hand.

We rode in silence for several blocks, thinking about the past and the future that loomed ahead of us big with history.

"We need you, Dan," said Boris suddenly. "We've felt the need of you before in the past five years; but now the need is imperative."

"I've seen things shaping themselves," I admitted.

"You understood the cable?"

"Yes, and I've made such arrangements in advance as could be made. But you understand, Boris, American bankers are not the kind of men to risk their money in millions on an ephemeral chance of success. They must *know*. Of course, with me it's different—I don't need to tell you that. But I'm only one man in a syndicate."

"I understand, old fellow," he answered. "You're with us, heart and soul. We know that. You helped us once before. Uncle Vassili and his party know what you are. But look out for Ferdinand. He——"

Boris broke off, with a shrug.

"Is his Majesty still undecided?"

"Yes—both sides against the middle. Nobody knows where he stands."

"Umph!" I said. "I can see interesting times ahead of us. And by the way, you have not told me yet who this Miss Vavaroff is."

"Seriously, Dan, she's one of the finest girls in the world," answered Boris earnestly. "She is of our party, yet she has

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more influence with the Czar than almost any one else. Don't ask me where she gets it. She's only a slip of a girl, but the old fox listens to her as if she were an oracle. They say she has some grip on him. I don't know; it may be idle talk. The fact remains, she is the best asset we've got—always excepting you."

"Nonsense," I retorted, not too well pleased, if the truth were known, to be classed with "a slip of a girl." "I am no more important than any other worker in the ranks, and I suppose Miss Vavaroff is pretty much the same. But who is she? You haven't told me yet."

"IT'S hard to tell you who she is," replied my friend. "She comes of one of the old noble houses, one of the few that survived the Turkish conquest. She came to Sofia two years ago, and since then she has been the chief attraction of the town. She lives in a wonderful old castle in the Macedonian Rhodopes, some distance across the frontier; and she has some lands in Bulgaria, too, and also, I believe, in Old Servia.

"She has no family, except an old aunt with whom she lives. There are all sorts of fanciful stories about her family history, and how her ancestors were permitted to retain their land because one of them turned Moslem. But nobody knows how much there is in them. The facts are what I told you."

"A remarkable story," I commented. "She would seem to be a remarkable girl."

"She is a remarkable girl," returned Boris. "And she knows all about you, too," he added laughingly. "We went over the plans together, my uncle, she and I; and she helped to persuade my uncle that it was time to send for you. To tell you the truth, she has heard so much about you, and your devoted admirers have painted you in such glowing colors, that I think it was a bit too much for her to see you the first time there at the station, playing the devoted to the Anhalt. Ha, ha, ha!"

And his dragoon-laugh echoed through the street. I looked at him uncomfortably.

"If you have been up to any tricks, Boris ——" I warned him. But he only laughed harder, and refused to talk seriously all the rest of the way to his uncle's house. The driver drew up before it with a flourish. It was not his privilege to drive under the *porte-cochère* of the minister every night, so I suppose he was justified.

CHAPTER IV

THE CONFIDENTIAL MINISTER

THE minister dropped slowly into his chair, pushing a box of cigars across the table toward me. He was a thin, white-haired old man, with the high brow and domelike head of a student, and the keen eyes and aggressive jaw of a man of action—a man to swing a nation's will, as he had in the past. And although he was one of the greatest men in the little Kingdom of Bulgaria, he was also one of the most democratic.

"Yes," he said slowly—he did everything slowly, yet with well-nigh inconceivable celerity—"yes, they were anxious to stop you. There must be a leak somewhere."

"Where?"

He spread his hands wide in a little gesture of helplessness.

"Ah, that is it! Where? Leaks are common in such matters—minor leaks. It is never possible to avoid them altogether. I remember back in '86, in Alexander's reign——"

He paused and stared vacantly into space. For a minute I thought I was in for one of his really remarkable reminiscences. But he brought himself back to the present with a manifest effort.

"Your pardon, Blair," he said with the gentle courtesy that distinguished him. "When you become of my age you, too, will feel the temptation to look back into the past, where all the riddles have been solved. As we grow old I think we grow lazy."

I could not avoid a smile, for a more indefatigable worker did not exist than Vassili Kurtsky, Boris' uncle.

"Aye, smile!" he added. "But remember this: The hardest workers are often the laziest men. And now to the present. What do you know of our affairs?"

"Nothing more than what the newspapers have printed."

"Part truth and part fiction, as usual," he returned with a scornful smile. "And yet the groundwork of every story has been fact. The Confederation of the Balkans actually exists!"

I looked about me in apprehension.

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"Before we go any farther, sir," I suggested, "are you safe against being overheard?"

"I think so," answered the minister. "In reason, at any rate. But wait."

He went to the door and clapped his hands; and presently his *kavass*, gorgeous in crimson and gold, and belted with an armory of revolvers and yataghans, appeared.

"Ilia, guard the door," said the minister.

I sank back into my chair with a feeling of additional safety. Barring a window, which opened upon the garden of the house, there was no other means of overhearing what went on in the room. And the window was shut, as I took pains to notice, while there were sentries at all the entrances to the grounds.

"Now we may talk in safety, I think," remarked the minister. "I was about to tell you of the Alliance. It has been completed. Greece, which we thought would require the hardest urging, turned out to be the most eager to join. Indeed, we discovered that the Greek Cabinet had been turning over a similar scheme, and they joyfully met us half way.

"Servia fell into line with little effort, and Montenegro followed suit as a matter of course. *Pouf!* The achievement that all of us had been longing for, and proclaiming impracticable, for the last thirty years, was as simple as a schoolboy's lesson-task. It was a job done overnight."

"And Roumania?" I questioned.

"Roumania we finally decided to leave out. She is too foreign in her interests, too much apart from all the rest of us. The Greeks, of course, we were obliged to bring in. But Roumania is not necessary—and there is an old adage about too many cooks spoiling the broth."

"The terms?"

"Aye, that's the rub!" The old fellow scratched his chin. "Of course, the terms on paper call for a military offensive and defensive alliance against Turkey. And the good Allies are ready enough. We have to hold 'em back. It's our old fox here—that and the consideration we've called you here to solve."

"Money?"

"Money. Just that. But I know you'll arrange matters for us there. We have a perfectly just and equable proposition to make to you. That will be simple. The real difficulty is——"

He nodded his head in the direction of the Palace.

"What is the game?" I asked.

"I wish I knew. He *says* he wants to avoid war; that he dreads an unnecessary conflict. But we know how long he would stay out of a war that he could be persuaded would undoubtedly result in Bulgaria's benefit."

"Oh, he's clever enough," I replied. "I'll back the Czar against any other ruler of Europe for cunning."

"Cunning! That's just it," flashed the minister. "He is so cunning that his good judgment is led astray by petty interests. And in the meantime our Allies are chafing at the bit, demanding to know why one act of aggression after another goes unchecked, and all but accusing us of double-dealing."

"How do matters stand here in Sofia?" I asked. I could see a coil of complications in prospect, such as had ever delighted me.

"Well, you understand the exact facts of the Confederation are secret—officially, at least. But enough has become known to excite party feeling. Of course the people are all siding with us—with the war party. But there is a small clique here in Sofia, small and powerful, who seem to be trying to swing Ferdinand in the opposite direction. You will know them; they are the Austrian ministry crowd, a number of foreigners, and, I'm ashamed to admit, some Bulgarians."

"It is an interesting situation," I mused.

"Interesting as a powder-magazine that has had its fuse touched off," returned the minister dryly.

"And what part am I to play in this nation-drama?"

The minister leaned forward.

"You have a most important rôle to play, Dan Blair," he said, speaking, if possible, more slowly than usual. "Yes, you, a foreigner, are picked for a more important part than any of my countrymen. First we come to you for money. Since you left Bulgaria you have prospered. The firm you belong to, I believe, has the reputation of being the richest banking-house in the world."

"I am only a single partner in it," I answered.

"Granted; yet you are a member, and our friend. Dan, Bulgaria comes to you for a loan of twenty-five million dollars—one hundred and twenty-five million lions!"

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"I'M SORRY," I said. "I'm sorry you put it this way. I can't give you twenty-five million dollars out of my own pocket. I'm not that rich. And in matters as big as this I have to think of my partners, who are quiet, stay-at-home men, averse to war and bloodshed, and who would never think of countenancing it by lending their own money to carry it on."

"The great bankers of Venice, Genoa and Florence lent money to all Europe to wage war," answered the minister quietly. "It mattered not to them so long as the war did not scorch their cities. This war will be far from America. It can not hurt your country. And the sum is not large."

"The sum is immaterial," I returned. "That is not the point. All of my money—and I have a few millions—is yours at command. But such a sum as you mention can come only from my company as a company, and I am sure there will have to be a moral justification for our raising it. You must show me that you will accomplish more than war with this money."

"I shall show you that," he replied quietly. "I shall show you that with this money we will accomplish peace; that it will be the means of peace, the factor that brings and insures peace. This is the plan. We have money for a war of three months. I have scrimped and saved and planned for a generation, as you know, to be able to have that much in the treasury. With that we shall be able to fight and win the war. I say 'we,' and you know that I mean we Bulgars, for upon us the brunt of the fighting must fall.

"But after we have won the war, in order to make Turkey yield, to wring peace from her most quickly at our terms, we must have some club to hold over her head. We shall not want to fight any longer. We shall have paid a sufficiently heavy toll in lives by then. But Turkey knows our circumstances fairly well. She knows that if we have the men, we lack the coin.

"And in a war she will reckon on this, even if she reckons foolishly. She will hold herself up with the hope that some day—next week, or next month, 'the accursed Bulgar pigs' will find they have no more money, and will have to give up the fight. Now, what I want from you is the assurance of a loan of twenty-five million dollars, when we have won two pitched battles from the Turks—if it is needed. In all probability it will never be necessary to carry out the transaction. It is the assurance we want, the knowledge that the money is to be had if it is needed.

"By the time we have accomplished our side of the bargain it will be to the best interests of all for the Turk to yield, and the strongest argument I know to wring submission from him is the knowledge that we have untapped resources. I think you need have no compunction about accepting the proposition, for it will be for the good of the Turks, as well as for that of our own people. And if the Turkish Government should persist in fighting after we have them beaten, then the most merciful course, in the long run, would be to go ahead and thrash them as thoroughly and as quickly as possible—all of which your money would enable us to do. What do you say?"

For fifteen minutes I sat and thought. Then I stood up and reached my hand across the table.

"I say 'yes,'" I said. "I'll make the arrangements by cable tonight."

The old man gripped my hand hard. He said nothing; but his eyes—great, dark, luminous eyes, more like a violinist's than a statesman's—glowed with a strangely limpid light. Then as I started to sit down, I thought I heard a rustle as of some one moving near by. I hesitated, then sank into a chair.

The minister was paying no attention to me. He, too, had sat down, and was leaning his head upon his hand, evidently buried deep in thought. Again came the rustling sound, as if some one who had been standing long in one position shifted his feet.

Whence came it? I looked about me in bewilderment. Beyond the door where the *kavass* mounted guard was only silence. The noise could not have come from that quarter. My eyes searched the room. There were no closets, only rows of bookshelves and several long tables piled with maps and papers. At the last I studied the window. The curtains were draped heavily over it, yet not so heavily but that I could see it was still closed as it had been when we first entered. It could not—— And again came the rustling noise.

Without a word I sprang to my feet and hurtled across the room, throwing myself head first into the window. Luckily it was

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one of the long kind in two halves that reached to the floor, for under the impetus of my spring the lock burst, and I sprawled out on to the low piazza beyond, landing solidly upon the back of a man who had been crouching against the panes. The force of the collision was sufficient to knock the breath out of him, and I had no difficulty in turning him over on his back, so that his face showed in the light that streamed through the open window. It was von Griffenstein, the Austrian spy, whom I had seen leave the train that noon at Nisch.

The fellow groaned and blinked his eyes in an evident return of consciousness; but before I could speak to him the slow, even tones of the minister came over my shoulder.

"That was rather sudden, Blair," he said. "Whom have you got there?"

"An Austrian spy. Have a look at him?"

The minister glanced down at the man's face.

"Pah!" he said, turning away. "I've seen him before. Let him up."

I climbed off the man somewhat reluctantly.

"Get up," I ordered shortly.

He got up.

"Have you any friends in the garden?" asked the minister.

The spy shook his head.

"How did you get in?" I interjected.

"Over the wall," he replied sullenly.

"Did you hear what we were talking about?" questioned the minister mildly.

"And what if I did?" burst out the man truculently. "It might be that you would not care to——"

"SILENCE!"

I cut him short sternly. The swine, to attempt that game! I had been watching him, and I knew that he could have heard nothing. The window was closed throughout our talk and our voices had been pitched low.

"You know you heard nothing! It's well for you that matters fell out so. Shall I turn him over to the guard?" I asked the minister.

The minister considered.

"Of what use would it be?" he asked. "It would only mean scandal, and a protest from Austria."

"You'd better think twice before you fool with me," sneered von Griffenstein. "My minister will make it hot for you."

"Do not be under any illusion, sir," said the minister coldly. "If I had reason to fear your operations I should certainly order you locked up. As it is, I think you are least troublesome at liberty—and under surveillance."

The last words were spoken with marked significance.

"I will call my body-servant and have him conduct you to the gate," continued Vassili Kurtsky. "And I would recommend you to be circumspect in your conduct hereafter in Sofia."

He clapped his hands, and the *kavass*, a giant of a man in his glittering uniform, strange mixture of the Orient with medieval Europe, appeared in the doorway.

"Ilia," the minister commanded, "conduct this person to the gate."

I followed the minister back into the room and carefully closed the window.

"Blair," he said suddenly, "I have told you of one job we have assigned to you. There is yet another—if you will take it."

"I'll take it," I replied. "What is it?"

He waved his hand toward the window.

"That man—that man and his friends. They need watching. It is as I said to you before; there are two parties in Sofia tonight, a party which calls for war and national aggrandizement, and a party which calls for peace and submission to the Austrians. We are greatly in the majority, but our opponents have a strong foothold in the Palace, and it is going to require every effort we can put forth to outmatch them. This is a matter of a few days, remember. Our allies are chafing at the leash. It is a question whether we can hold them in, whether a fiasco can be prevented, until we are able to bring the whole might of Bulgaria into line. Will you help us in this fight, too?"

"I'm with you to the hilt," I replied.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "I was sure of it. And now it is time for bed—for you, at any rate. As for myself——"

He glanced whimsically at the stacks of papers on his desk.

"Yes, I'm quite ready for bed," I answered with a yawn.

"Pleasant dreams, then," said the minister, opening the door for me. "I shall have plenty for you to do in the morning.

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By the way, you must meet Masoya—Miss Vavaroff—tomorrow."

"I've heard of her," I answered—a bit coolly, I'm afraid.

"So?" he returned speculatively. "Well, you'll probably hear much more of her. Good night, my boy."

CHAPTER V

A RIDE INTO THE COUNTRY

WHEN I came downstairs the next morning, rather late after a lazy man's breakfast in my room, I thought at first the house was deserted; so I rang for a servant and bade him have the horse the minister had been kind enough to place at my disposal brought around to the entrance. But as I stood in the hall, pulling on my gauntlets, I caught the sound of voices in the morning room; and thinking it might be the minister and Boris, I sauntered carelessly in.

Well, I was right in one premise; Boris was in the morning room. But his companion was Masoya Vavaroff—perhaps the last person I wanted to see at that instant.

They were standing over by an opened window chatting earnestly, as I entered. Both were booted and spurred, Boris in uniform and evidently prepared for his morning visit to the cavalry barracks, Miss Vavaroff in habit and natty hat, and with a great boar-hound curled at her feet. When they saw me she flushed slightly, although her eyes met mine in a level glance. Boris laughed.

"Talk of the devil," he remarked casually. "Eh, Masoya? Well, you're just in time, Dan, to take Miss Vavaroff for her morning ride."

"I haven't met Miss Vavaroff yet," I answered as pleasantly as I could. "But I shall be very pleased to accompany her, if she will permit me."

"Pardon the oversight," said Boris.

And he went through the formalities, with an elaborate attention to detail that he obviously considered quite humorous.

"I've been trying to convince Miss Vavaroff that you're really a half-way decent chap, Dan," he continued. "She—well, she seems to have her doubts."

Miss Vavaroff did not look pleased. I dare say, for that matter, that I did not either.

"You talk too much, Boris," she reproved him angrily.

"Yes," replied Boris, "I've been told that before. But I must be off." And he strolled out.

There was an embarrassing interval of silence, during which Miss Vavaroff pulled the triangular ears of her hound and favored me with a view of three tendrils of evasive hair and part of a pink ear of her own. It was not an uninteresting interval. I was almost sorry when it was broken.

"You had an adventurous trip, Boris says," she remarked presently, but without looking up.

"Somewhat," I returned dryly.

"I am sorry that you, an outsider, have been obliged to undergo so much danger and hardship for Bulgaria," she went on.

"It is not the first danger or hardship that I have borne for Bulgaria," I returned sharply. "And—pardon me, mademoiselle, but I am not generally regarded as an outsider in Bulgaria."

Her head sank lower, and the pink ear—all save the tip of it—was lost to view.

"I am sorry," she said, and her voice sounded quite humble. "I did not mean to give you offense, Mr. Blair."

"Pray do not trouble yourself," I answered coldly.

Suddenly she turned and looked full at me. The air of reserve, of aloofness tinged with suspicion with which she had regarded me before, was cast aside. She looked at me frankly out of eyes that shone brightly in her flushed face.

"How unkind you must think me—you who have done so much for Bulgaria!" she exclaimed. "No, don't stop me. I must say it. I have been unkind to you; and when I have been unkind to one who does not deserve it, I can not rest until I have confessed my fault. Please forgive me, and believe that my rudeness was unintentional—or, I should say, misled."

For a minute I did not know what to make of it. There was something queenly about this strange girl's manner, as she apologized with such sweet humbleness. I found myself bowing low, and protesting that it was preposterous for her to think that she had ever offended me.

"All the same, you didn't like the way I drove off from the station last night—did you?" she asked almost roguishly.

"No, I didn't," I answered after a

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moment's hesitation. "But we'll cry quits now. Is your horse ready? I think the best way to get to know people is to ride with them out in the fresh pure air, where you can really be your unrestrained self. Will you try my prescription?"

She laughed.

"Are you sure you weren't planning a ride out to the barracks to look up some of your old cronies? Oh, don't mistake, Mr. Blair; I've heard much about you in the last few days!"

"I'm quite at liberty this morning," I responded. "And I shall be deeply offended if you don't seal the compact of friendship between us by granting me your company. As a matter of fact, I have been practically commanded by the minister to cultivate your acquaintance."

"So you are left no choice? Poor fellow!"

"Thanks; but I'm not requiring commiseration. I like nothing better than a brisk morning gallop with a congenial soul, and—this is a secre —I've reversed a certain erroneous first impression about you and me. We're going to be friends."

"And congenial souls?" she asked. "That means a great deal more than just friends."

"Why not?" I answered. "Why not? Good friends, true friends—are they not congenial souls?"

"Perhaps," she said.

And then she seemed to fall into a day-dream from which I did not care to awaken her. I was far too much interested in studying her face, which, for the first time, I had an opportunity to observe closely. It was a strong young face, commanding yet tender —the face of a woman born to lead.

IT WAS the dog that aroused us. He had not left her side since I entered, but had lain there, watching me with unblinking eyes. Now he got up and stretched himself, yawning. I had never seen such an enormous dog. He came almost to his mistress' waist, and was heavily built in proportion, with massive jaw and long, savage, white fangs; but he put his great head in her hand and looked up at her wistfully as if to say, "Come, now, haven't you been indoors long enough?"

We both of us burst into laughter at the manifest meaning of the hound's act.

"He's right, don't you think?" I said. "We'd best be starting, or the morning will be gone."

"Yes," she agreed. "Dear me, how rude you must think me! Here I have gone and day-dreamed the minutes away in my usual selfish manner."

We had come to the *porte-cochère* where the horses were waiting. Waving the groom to one side, I gave her a hand and she vaulted lightly to her saddle.

"Where to?" I questioned, as we cantered down the driveway side by side.

"Wherever you say," she answered brightly. "It's all one to me."

"Then shall we say the bridle-road out toward Vitoshak?"

"Gladly; and let's give the horses their heads."

I nodded, and we went swinging down the road, out toward the suburbs and the overshadowing mass of Mount Vitoshak that rears its giant shape high above the city.

When we had got well out into the suburbs of Sofia, and had pulled the horses down to a walk, she turned abruptly to me.

"I've always had a very, very high opinion of you," she said. "I—you have always been a sort of hero. Do you understand? I had such lofty ideals for you to live up to—which was hardly fair, perhaps, because I imposed them on you in a most arbitrary fashion. And I can't tell you how hurt I was yesterday when I thought that woman had trapped you.

"You see, I had never thought of you as a man who would know women and be safe against the bad ones; and I've known that woman to trap several of the nicest boys in Sofia—trap them deliberately, heartlessly, in cold blood, and ruin them. But I didn't really know you."

We rode along in silence for some minutes. This strange girl had a way of divesting things of all formality, of getting down to the grit and kernel of life, of making a few minutes suffice to fill up the gaps of years of acquaintanceship. An hour before I had detested her. Now I was convinced that if I had a true friend in the world it was Masoya Vavaroff, and of all the friends I had I was proudest of her.

"I'm glad you have felt that way," I said at last. "I'm glad you drove off the way you did last night. I can see now that it was rather a compliment to me—more of a compliment than it would have been if you had waited."

She raised her eyes to mine, and in the look she gave me I had my reward.

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"Come, shall we have another gallop," I exclaimed.

In a second we were off, the horses straining at the bits and fairly eating up the soft earthen roadway. We had passed the suburbs, passed the barracks of the infantry regiments, passed the southernmost of the great chain of forts that guard the city. We had come into a country of little villages nestling against the slopes of the mountain. A river brawled beside the path and quaintly garbed children waved flowers at us.

TO ME Bulgaria has always been my second home, a land no less dear to me than my own. And as I breathed in the keen, exhilarating air, and my eyes rested on the purplish streaks of mountain heather and the dense pine-forests that clothed the distant hills, the love of the land took full possession of me.

Bulgaria—the Land of the Lion, the little land that in less than two generations had thrown off the hand of the oppressive Moslem masters and regained its old-time independence, and that was now straining every nerve to take its former place in the council of the nations.

Perhaps something of my thoughts was mirrored in my face, for presently I felt a hand on my arm and turned to see my companion's eyes fixed on mine. Her voice, clear and bell-like, sounded distinct above the thud of the horses' hoofs.

"It's a brave land, my little country, is it not?" she said.

"None braver," I answered her; and I meant it.

"The minister told me this morning that you are going to help us," she went on. "You are the best friend Bulgaria has; better than any of her native sons."

"Nonsense!" I returned. This was the kind of stuff I detested. "There are a score of Bulgarians I can mention by name who have done more for their country than I, or possibly any man you know. But they have never received any recognition for it."

"That's your opinion," she smiled. "Keep it—and I'll keep my own. It's time we were turning, though, if I am to keep a luncheon engagement."

So we reined in, and swung back toward home. For a space the only break in the silence was the chinking of the bridle-irons.

"You are going to see the Czar?" she asked then.

"Why, I had not thought of it," I said in some surprise. "His Majesty does not care any too much for me, I believe. I have been told he thinks me a foreign upstart."

"You should not allow the idle gossip of a Court to prejudice you," she reproved.

"Well, even if he did like me I wouldn't have much of an opinion of him after the way he has treated some brave gentlemen I know," I returned disrespectfully.

"That is by the point," she retorted, smiling. "I suppose Mr. Dan Blair is one of the few men in Bulgaria who can say with impunity what he thinks of our monarch. But what I meant to say was that I deemed it *advisable* for you to see the Czar."

"Why?" I asked bluntly.

In truth, I was not very anxious to meet Ferdinand. I knew him for what he was—a former German princeling whom fate had seated on a throne. Aye, an able ruler in many ways, I grant. A diplomatist, second to none in Europe, who could have matched his wits with Machiavelli, Metternich, Richelieu or Talleyrand; clever, inscrutable. But always assertive.

"Why?" I repeated.

Masoya Vavaroff looked at me with candidly clear eyes.

"Because he is the sovereign of Bulgaria, and the man to whom we must pin our hopes for good or ill," she answered quietly. "And, Mr. Blair, it is only right that he should have an opportunity to talk with you and hear from your own lips what you are willing to do. Besides, I think it would have much influence with him. As you know, there are two parties in Sofia today, and the one that fights against us is most strongly entrenched in the Palace. Your advice would be bound to have much influence with his Majesty; he would not be influenced in his opinion of it by his opinion of you. He is not that kind."

"No, he is not," I admitted grimly. "He'd just as soon profit by my help, even though he hated me. But how can an interview be arranged? Through the minister?"

"Oh, I'll attend to it," she answered carelessly. "It had better be some time in the next day or two—say day after tomorrow."

A strange girl, indeed, I thought; a girl who arranged interviews with kings as casually as if they were doctors. But I always loved mysteries.

"I'll race you home," I said.

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In a second we were off, dun Stoyan loping easily at our heels, the dirt flying in clouds from the horses' scampering hoofs. It was a good race and I might have won—but I pulled up half a block short of the gates, and gave her the lead by a head.

CHAPTER VI

THE BALL AT THE BRITISH MINISTRY

FOR the rest of that day I was busy looking up old friends, so I saw no more of Masoya Vavaroff; but on the afternoon of the next day a servant brought me a note as I sat talking with the minister in his study:

> Come to the ball at the British Ministry tonight. Everybody will be there, and I want to see you.
> M. V.

I showed it to the minister.

"Are you going?" I asked.

He nodded.

"I see you're already bound to the chariot-wheel," he commented.

"What do you mean?"

He laughed.

"My boy, she wins everybody that way. Don't feel ashamed about it."

"I'm not ashamed," I retorted. "But since we're on the subject of the lady, sir, I wish you'd tell me the source of her strange influence."

"I wish I knew," he returned. "No, I'll be frank with you, Dan. I do know a little, but it is not a story that I can tell even to you. You must get it from her own lips. She is a very wonderful woman, and a very good woman, too, who influences for the better all men and things she comes in contact with." He paused, then added, "She likes you."

"Likes me?" I exclaimed.

"Yes; she told me so," he replied. "She has a very high opinion of you, Dan. You see, we told her about you before you came, and now she says we did not exaggerate."

"I suppose it's an honor," I muttered, feeling more or less like a fool.

"It is," he answered.

The two words were as good as volumes in tribute to the prestige of this beautiful young girl, whose power in Sofia seemed to equal that of the Czar in his Palace. This thought reminded me of the promise she had made during our ride.

"Has she told you of her idea that I should see Ferdinand?" I asked.

"Yes, we talked it over," admitted the minister imperturbably. "She generally discusses things with me. So far as I know, I am the only person to whose advice she listens—although I shouldn't wonder if I am to be supplanted in the near future."

"Why?"

"It is a mere suspicion I have," he answered evasively, with an unusual twinkle in his eye.

I arose.

"I'll leave you with your suspicions," I said. "By the way, is there any news?"

"Nothing special. Montenegro is chafing at the leash; I fought all this morning with the Servian minister. God knows what Greece may do tomorrow. It is as I told you; they are beginning to accuse us of double-dealing. I have had to use your name to keep them quiet."

I sat down again abruptly.

"Use my name?" I repeated.

"Yes—just a hint, you know. It was a godsend to me. I talked vaguely about your presence and strenuous efforts to fight for time in order to place a large loan, and I really think they all went away satisfied."

"Hm!" I ejaculated. "You will be getting us all in so deep we'll never get out."

"So I anticipate," he remarked pleasantly. "Nothing would suit me better."

"No, I suppose not," I answered. "But you forget that I am a business man—outside of the Balkans."

He glanced at me quickly, then put both hands on my shoulders.

"You're with us to the limit, aren't you?" he demanded.

"Absolutely," I answered.

"Good!" He drew a long breath. "Then don't worry about my peccadillos. Come, let us forget about such matters. I must go to the *Sobranje*. And you?"

"I'll kill time the rest of the afternoon," I responded. "Until tonight."

"Until tonight." And he passed out, a shadowy wisp of a man, yet endowed with a will-power that triumphed over brute strength at every turn.

As I sat thinking, the afternoon waned and twilight came. I was thinking over but one thing—a picture of a slim, lithe girl, with wonderful ruddy-gold hair, and beside her a great dun hound.

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IT WAS late when Boris and I reached the British ministry that evening. The rooms were full of people—the diplomatic crowd, the Court set, and dozens of strapping officers in the handsome uniforms of the Bulgarian Army, with a smattering of wealthy citizens of the capital and members of the *Sobranje*. As we passed into the drawing-room to pay our respects before mingling with the crowd, I caught a glimpse of the Countess von Anhalt and the wife of the Austrian minister, surrounded by several of the younger legation attachés and some subalterns fresh from the Military School. The Countess waved her fan at me eagerly, but I bowed coldly and passed on. Boris chuckled.

"You haven't any use for the fair charmer any more, have you? Mind handing over your rights?"

But I paid no heed to him, for I had glimpsed Masoya Vavaroff standing talking to the British minister and his wife at the far end of the room. She turned and greeted me as I came up, then presented me.

I fancied the minister looked at me rather keenly. There had been some gossip already concerning my presence in Sofia, although a very efficient gendarmerie and secret police had suppressed reckless journalistic inferences. We chatted for a few minutes about trivialities, and when Boris came up Miss Vavaroff and I took advantage of the opportunity to break away.

"Let us go into the conservatory," she suggested.

It was only a step, and in a minute or so we were seated upon a comfortable settle, banked around with palms and backed by a wide window, through which poured the cool night-breeze to wander unimpeded amongst the flowers and shrubs.

Neither of us spoke for some time. Masoya Vavaroff sat with her chin cupped in her hand, staring out at the glory of the night; and I sat and watched her. The night was beautiful, but it was not so beautiful as she.

Sitting there against the background of the night, with the diadem of her hair clasped by that antique fillet, she looked so rarely beautiful that it made the heart ache in my body; for withal there was something about her that tugged at some thread of memory far back in my brain, as if the picture suggested some one who had been and gone, ages past.

"Of what are you thinking?" she asked suddenly.

And I was at some pains to find an answer.

"Of your fillet," I stammered at last. "It is of an unusual design."

"Yes," she answered abstractedly. "It has been in my family many generations."

"And of what are *you* thinking?" I asked, seeing that she had lapsed into silence again.

She flashed a momentary smile at me.

"I was thinking of you," she answered frankly; "of you, and of the awful load that we have laid upon you—yes, and the danger."

"The danger?"

"Yes. There is danger. I only found it out this morning when I saw the Czar. Somebody has been to him and has tried to poison his mind against you, so that he would not see you. I was able to undo the damage that had been done, and he is to receive you tomorrow afternoon. But, oh, Mr. Blair! I know there is danger. They will stop at nothing to get you out of the way. For they know that you are our last trump card, and our strongest."

"Who are they?" I questioned.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"The Austrian crowd. You know the ones I mean. And they have friends in the Palace—as you have been told." She leaned closer toward me. "Beware of Gortcheff, especially."

"Gortcheff? Constantine Gortcheff?" I exclaimed in amazement.

She nodded.

"Gortcheff is one of the most dangerous men we have to face," she said, "if he is not the most dangerous. And I have heard that he particularly hates you."

Constantine Gortcheff was a general in the Bulgarian Army, aide-de-camp and equerry to the Czar—a member, supposedly, of the military set, who were all known to be keen for war. It was almost unbelievable that he could be a traitor. I had never known the man—during my previous stay he had been absent on a special mission in Russia; but on the contrary I had never heard anything derogatory to him. "And why should he hate me?" I asked her.

"I don't know," she answered. Her head dropped on her breast, and a flood of crimson suffused her bare neck and arms and

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climbed all the way to her cheeks. "Unless," she qualified, raising her eyes bravely to mine, "it is because he can not bear to see me friendly with any other man."

"Oh!" I said. "So that's how he feels! Well, it would give me extreme pleasure to have him manifest his dislike in any way he chooses."

"He is a very good swordsman," she said, almost fearfully.

"I'll get Boris to give me some lessons," I answered. "But I have used a blade before."

"And a splendid shot," she added.

"Pistols would suit me better," I declared gaily. "After all, the pistol is the American tool. No; I refuse to scare."

She smiled a trifle wanly.

"I do not want you to have to fight," she said. "Mr. Blair, it does not seem right for you to risk so much for us. We have no right to ask it."

"See here, Miss Vavaroff," I objected, leaning toward her, "I'm in this fight for keeps. I'm in it partly because I like the game; partly because I love Bulgaria as if it were my own land; partly because I've hosts of good friends here; and partly because—well, because it's your fight, and, hang it, you deserve to win it!"

HER cheeks flushed pinker, but before she could answer there was a commotion in the drawing-room that seemed to indicate some unusual event. Couples hurried past the conservatory bound for the general center of interest near the entrance, and we caught fragments of conversation—"Montenegro" and "war."

"Something has happened! Come, let us see what it is," exclaimed Masoya Vavaroff.

She rose to her feet. Although loath to break up our *tête-à-tête*, I realized the futility of trying to distract her attention, so I offered her my arm and we proceeded toward an excited group of guests who were clustered about a man in uniform at the door. I had never seen him before, but there was something about his dark, haughty face, set on a thick bull neck fitting into powerful shoulders, that instinctively repelled me. I did not like him.

Half way toward where he stood Boris met us, his face agleam with excitement.

"Heard the news?" he cried. "Gortcheff has just come from the Palace with it. Montenegro has declared war!"

"So that's Gortcheff!" I answered, my first thought being of the identity of the messenger and not of the stirring news he brought.

"Yes," snapped Boris impatiently. "Never mind who he is; that isn't important. What counts is his message. Uncle Vassili has already left for the Palace. There's to be an extraordinary session of the Cabinet."

"Has the fighting begun?" cut in Miss Vavaroff sharply.

"Not yet, I believe. The Montenegrins crossed the frontier this evening, but they will not commence active hostilities until the morning."

"It would seem that our Montenegrin friends have cut the Gordian knot," I remarked.

"Yes, and we shall have all the harder task to secure immediate action," retorted Miss Vavaroff. "Now they will say: 'Wait, wait, wait! Let us see what is going to happen.' Oh, I know!"

"Most likely," said Boris. "However, it's a step in advance."

"I must speak to Gortcheff," said our companion abruptly. "Mr. Blair, I am so sorry to trouble you, but I left my fan in the conservatory. Would you mind——"

With a hasty smile she swept off on Boris' arm. Evidently I was not to meet my enemy if she could prevent it. I smiled at the idea and walked back to where we had been sitting. The place seemed darker than it had been. As I stooped among the palms to hunt for the dainty bit of silk and ivory, I heard a rustle behind me and turned quickly; but as I turned something heavy struck my head with a dull, crunching blow, a wave of nausea swept through my body, and I knew no more.

CHAPTER VII

IN THE HANDS OF THE TZIGANES

IT WAS light when I became conscious again. I was strapped on the back of a pony, riding a sort of pillion behind another man. All around me stretched a savage vista of tree-clad mountains, through whose dark defiles wound the narrow track, along which the little cavalcade of which I was the center wended its way. As I

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gathered my wits together and, struggling with the splitting headache that racked my brain, tried to piece out the incidents that had brought me to this situation, the character of my companions came home to me.

They were Tziganes, members of that peculiar Gipsy race that owns no ruler, no God, no home. Apparently it was quite a small band, a mere raiding-party of a tribe. This idea was reënforced presently when I noticed that there were no women or children with us.

They were a hard-looking lot, but then that is the style of the Tziganes. They live by their wits and craftiness, coupled to some extent with the superstitious fear in which many of the Balkan peasants hold them.

I addressed the fellow behind whom I rode, speaking in the peasant dialect. But he shook his head with a grunt. So I twisted around on my somewhat uncomfortable seat. and hailed one behind me who seemed to be the leader of the rear guard.

"Well, well; what is it, guspodine?" he asked gruffly.

"What's my ransom?" I answered.

He shook his head.

"You mistake, guspodine. There is no ransom."

"You are taking a lot of trouble with a useless carcass, then," I retorted. "What's the use of lugging a man off into the mountains to knock him on the head?"

"It's a question of price," the fellow replied.

"Well, what is the price?" I demanded. "No matter what you have been paid, I'll go higher."

The Gipsy's eyes flashed.

"That is not the way of the Tziganes, guspodine," he said. "We never sell a patron out—not until after the job is done, at any rate. Today we are hired to seize you. But tomorrow, it may be, you will hire us to seize the man we work for today; and tomorrow we will be as faithful to you as we are to him today."

"Well then, what is the game?" I asked impatiently.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"That I don't know—and if I did know, I should not tell you."

"Who is your employer?" I continued.

"You're following a blind trail, guspodine," replied the man mockingly.

I pretended to be satisfied and laughed with as near an approach to good-nature as I could assume.

"At least you'll make me a little more comfortable?" I suggested. "There's no reason to truss me up this way, now."

"Oh, aye; there we'll oblige you, and gladly," he returned. "Here, Yanno, Peter; untie the Frank's bonds. Give him some bread and cheese, too. But I warn you," he added, turning to me, "that if you make any attempt to escape——"

He tapped a big six-shooter that protruded from the sash around his waist.

"Never fear," I answered. "I'm not looking for eternity."

He rode off with a nod; and presently another fellow brought up a spare pony, which he hitched with pieces of rope between the beasts of himself and a comrade, and then signed to me to mount it. I did so, and was given some bread and cheese. Then we rode on, higher and higher into the impenetrable mountain fastnesses—fastnesses so somber and desolate that I knew we must be traversing some back track of the smugglers that would debouch upon the Turkish frontier.

I was comfortable enough now. Indeed, I was rather taken with the zest of the adventure. If I did not know my fate, I had no just cause for worry; and I could not conceive any very deep-dyed villainy as responsible for my disappearance. The most probable explanation was the one I had endeavored to elicit from the leader I had questioned—that an itinerant band of Tziganes had captured me solely because, as a foreigner, I might be expected to provide a ransom.

Therefore I rode on, carefree and almost happy, speculating upon the feelings of Masoya Vavaroff, who had sent me to find her fan. She must think me a sorry cavalier. But certainly my friends' suspicions had been aroused by now, and they would discover that I had been the victim of foul play.

I wondered if they would pursue. No, they would scarcely think of that, not knowing what route my kidnappers would take. In fact, if they searched at all it would probably be near the capital.

WE DID not halt at noon. The Gipsies passed around rations of bread, cheese and onions, which we munched as we rode along. Not once did we meet a living soul.

Along toward dusk we stopped in a

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natural clearing, a little glade traversed by the faintly marked path. Fires were kindled, blankets were spread, and guards posted. One fellow paid particularly close attention to me, but he might have spared himself the effort. I was not contemplating escape.

A sheepskin cloak had been spread for me in front of one of the fires, and I made myself comfortable on this.

I was tired, and I stretched myself lazily, glad of the opportunity to rest. If death had promised on the morrow I don't think I should have exerted myself to escape. But suddenly, as I lay there, I heard a voice that seemed vaguely familiar to me. It was a voice of quiet authority, cultured, crisp, in striking contrast to the snarling accents of the Tziganes. Where had I heard it before?

I sat up and looked around. Again sounded the voice—this time just across the fire from me. I rose to my feet and sauntered around the blaze. There, standing talking to my uncommunicative friend of the morning, the leader of the rear guard, was Kemil Bey. He was dressed in flaring Gipsy raiment, with golden earrings dangling from his lobes, and a gaudy turban on his head; but beyond question he was the Turkish spy I had encountered on the Orient Express.

I began to understand. My kidnapping was more serious than I had supposed. It was involved in the strange tangle of intrigues into which I had been projected in Sofia. Some big stake was being played for. What—— Ah, suppose it was simply a case of getting me away from Sofia, of preventing the actual consummation of the loan the minister had suggested, of removing me from a sphere where I might be able to influence the Czar for war! If that were the idea, it was a clever trick, daring and clever.

Having plumbed the mystery so far, it became apparent to me that my best move was to attempt to call the enemy's hand. So I walked up to Kemil Bey and saluted him quietly.

"Don't you entertain your guests personally, Kemil?" I asked.

The Turk looked uncomfortable and the Gipsy leader scowled.

"I am sorry if there is anything you have wanted, Monsieur Blair," said the former apologetically. "If you will——"

"Oh, no, everything is all right," I cut in. "I thought you might care to give me something of a white man's company; that's all."

"I shall be most pleased to, Monsieur Blair," he answered more easily. "This trick that has been played upon you was not of my planning, and believe me, I am an unwilling host. But I have my duty to do."

"Certainly," I replied. "But what's the object?"

He smiled.

"Well, monsieur, you have managed to make yourself *persona non grata* at Sofia with the agents of two countries; and it was finally decided that the best way to render you harmless during the present crisis would be to kidnap you and put you in a place out of harm's way."

"Which in this case is where?" I asked.

"Oh, there you ask an embarrassing question," he countered. "It's a place where you will be perfectly comfortable and happy, but unable to transact—important loans, monsieur."

The leader of the Tziganes had slouched off, leaving us alone together. I motioned to the cloak upon which I had been lying.

"Will you sit?"

"With pleasure."

He produced tobacco and paper, and we rolled cigarettes.

"News travels fast in Sofia; eh?" I suggested.

The Turk flashed a quick smile at me.

"It does," he admitted.

"I was ready for almost anything but this," I went on. "It's a bold play."

"And therefore successful," he said. "Your friends have not expected it, consequently they are powerless to counter it. Long before they will be within miles of us we shall be safely across the frontier."

"Oho! So I'm to be taken across the frontier, am I?"

"Turkish air will be singularly healthful for you, Monsieur Blair," he replied feelingly.

On my soul, the fellow appealed to me. He was so direct.

"And if I try to escape?" I pressed.

The expression of his face changed swiftly.

"Don't try it—on the advice of a well-wisher, Monsieur Blair," he answered.

"Don't worry," I said dryly. "As I told your able lieutenant some hours back, I'm not looking for eternity."

"Good!" he exclaimed, obviously relieved. "If you care to give your parole——"

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"That would be rather foolish now, wouldn't it?" I put it to him good-naturedly.

"I suppose it would," he agreed seriously. "However, I'll make things as easy for you as possible. This outing isn't a picnic for me, as you can readily imagine; and if you don't mind bunking with a spy——"

He winced as he spoke, and I saw that the idea hurt him, so I clapped him heartily on the shoulder.

"Nonsense, man!" I protested. "You're a soldier first; and as for spying—it's not a trade one enjoys, I suppose, yet it's necessary. And some very gallant soldiers and gentlemen have given up their lives on the hangman's scaffold in performance of their duty."

THAT night we slept under the same blankets, and the next day we rode together. He was a good comrade, was Kemil Bey—a major in the Imperial Guard, I learned, and more used to leading a squadron of troopers than to back-stairs diplomatic work.

The second day passed like the first, wholly uneventfully. But about noon of the third day I noticed a worried look upon Kemil Bey's face, after a conference he had with the Tzigane chief, and it seemed to me that the band rode in more compact formation. At evening they posted double guards around the bivouac.

There was no mistaking that something had gone wrong on the fourth day, however. The men looked sulky and cast angry glances at me; Kemil held numerous conferences with the Tzigane chief; and the Gipsies rode in a close bunch, with weapons ready and eyes roving over the countryside. It looked as if they feared an ambuscade. Finally I put the question point-blank to my captor.

"You're afraid of something. What is it?" I demanded.

"These fellows say your friends are following us," he answered uneasily.

The tone in which he spoke, rather than the words, made my heart bound with hope.

"How can they be?" I asked—with affected carelessness, however.

"God knows! It seemed to me we had covered up our trail."

He looked back over the countryside with ill concealed nervousness.

"We must push on faster," he added. "The frontier is not far ahead."

He shouted to the Tziganes just ahead of us to prick up their ponies, and our whole cavalcade jingled on at a more rapid gait.

CHAPTER VIII

MASOYA PLAYS TRUMPS

ALL of a sudden the thud of hoofs and jingle of harness was punctuated by another sound—a deep, far-off baying that rose and fell and swelled and died away again.

Its effect upon my captors was most peculiar. The uneasiness which they had been showing since the day before became more marked. They drew together into a close-formed squadron.

Even the men who had been constituted scouts and flankers dropped back into touch with the main body.

The men fingered their weapons, but not with any manner of readiness to use them. It was rather as if they were in deadly fear of a mysterious something against which weapons would be of no avail. And each time the wind brought down that distant monotonous baying, as of some giant hell-hound, a shudder passed through the ranks. They did not speak, even among themselves, and all the efforts of Kemil Bey to extract information as to the cause of their manifest fear were met by evasive replies or stubborn silence.

"It is the friends of the Frank," was the only answer the chief would make. "They are not good people to have behind one."

Kemil Bey was baffled and uncertain.

"These people are as superstitious as the peasants they hoodwink," he said. "There is no use in losing my temper, for that would only make matters worse. They have become determined that something—what it is they admit they don't know—is threatening them, and they are afraid of it."

"If you expect to have any trouble with them——" I suggested.

"Thanks," he answered. "Frankly, I'll be glad of your help if they start anything. You can't tell with these people, although I don't think they will—unless I try to make them turn around or halt."

The hours passed slowly. Finally the afternoon began to merge into evening. The shadows of the mountain-peaks around us

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were lengthening. The eery influence of the hills and blanketing forests shut us in and oppressed us with an almost suffocating weight of silence and loneliness, broken only by that inevitable baying that grew nearer and nearer as each minute ticked away.

The men were reduced to a condition bordering on panic. Their ponies were tired out and despite the urging of whip and spur refused to go faster than an ambling walk.

I'll admit that the spell of the thing had gotten a grip upon me as well. I had become convinced that we were not being pursued by my friends, but by some malign influence that was capable of harming even as many as we were.

Twilight deepened into dusk, and still the fearsome pursuit continued. Our weary cavalcade pressed on, afraid to stop for food and rest. A breeze sprang up that moaned among the branches; and always that monotonous baying echoed across the hills.

Nearer and nearer it drew. Louder and louder its raucous cadences sounded in our ears. The sweat started out on my skin; my teeth rattled in my head; an ague shook me from sole to crown. Within me my heart was thumping like a trip-hammer. All about me I heard the sharp, hissing breaths of men in deadly fear.

"In God's name, what is it?" I muttered to the Tzigane leader beside me.

"God knows," he answered unsteadily. "The werwolves, perhaps. Sometimes they run the hills at night."

Then of a sudden, and without warning, it seemed as if the noise burst upon us with overwhelming volume, literally right at our heels, accompanied by a ghostly thunder of hoofs; and out of the night behind us swept a horse and rider, and beside them ran a lower shape of mystery that raised its head and gave forth that indescribable, haunting sound that had pursued us throughout the afternoon. We stopped simultaneously as at a signal, and our pursuer and its evil-seeming mate rode right up to us and around the flanks of the Gipsy troop, past men who writhed with fear at the imminence of what they took to be the Fiend—and so to the head, where it halted.

FOR a space it sat there motionless. Then a hand was raised and twisted off a cloak that had shrouded the figure from head to foot. Beside it the smaller shape sat on its haunches and slavered. All about me I felt the ranks of the troop rustle as with relief that the pursuit was over and the breath of life still whole in their bodies.

"Make a light," commanded the shape on the horse, briefly.

Two men dismounted hastily and lit torches, which they brought forward. The figure motioned with a hand and they took up position, one on each side of it. The flames of the torches bit into the darkness and formed a segment of light, with the two mysterious shapes in its center. I looked, and gasped; then looked again, unwilling to believe my eyes. But no; it was impossible to doubt. Our pursuers were Masoya Vavaroff and the great hound Stoyan!

It was obvious that the Tziganes recognized them, for I heard several murmur her name. I looked at Kemil Bey's face, and it mirrored only amazement and incomprehension. From him I looked to this strange girl who had overtaken us alone, apparently, and who dared to stand here, devoid of the protection of superstitious fear she had succeeded, whether wilfully or not, in casting between herself and this desperate band of men, whose lightest crime was smuggling and to whom murder was an every-day occurrence.

She said nothing for several minutes, and I thought it peculiar that utter silence should prevail among the ranks of my captors. Instead of surging forward as I had half expected them to do, and tearing her from her horse, they cowered as closely together as they had before.

"You know me," she said at last in contemptuous tones. "Where is Beran Kokalji?"

The leader of the Tziganes rode forward from his place beside me into the center of the light cast by the torches, and louted low.

"I am here, lady," he said.

"Where is the Guspodine Blair?" she demanded.

The man turned with a relieved look on his face and beckoned to me.

"He is here, lady," he answered. "He is well, and has been kindly treated."

"With the exception of a somewhat shrewd bump on the head," I remarked, pushing my pony forward.

She frowned.

"They shall pay, and pay dearly, for every inconvenience you have been put to,

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Mr. Blair." She turned to Kokalji. "You have with you also one who has inspired you to commit this iniquity? Show him to me."

Kokalji spoke a word over his shoulder, and two Gipsies pushed forward on each side of Kemil Bey. The unfortunate Turk was the color of marble.

"Who are you?" asked Masoya Vavaroff.

"I am——" he started to say; then checked himself, realizing his danger, and drew himself up. "What I am, mademoiselle, can not interest you," he returned haughtily. "This man here—" he indicated me—"is my prisoner. These men—" his sweeping arm included the ring of savage-looking Gipsies that had formed around us— "are in my employ. You also are my prisoner."

Masoya laughed shortly. It was not the laugh I had heard her use in Sofia. There was nothing silvery about it; it clinked like steel against steel.

"So?" she said quietly. "I do not think you know who I am. Kokalji," she exclaimed to the Tzigane leader, "whose word is law to you?"

"The word of the Lady of Czarigrad," he answered with a salaam.

I noted that most of the other men ducked their heads in a hasty gesture of respect at this odd title—odd, for Czarigrad is the Slav name for Constantinople.

"Yes, yes," they murmured. "The Lady of Czarigrad first."

"I am afraid you are under a misapprehension," she continued. "As it happens, what I say has weight along the frontier. Now you are a Turkish spy. I know who you are. I even know your instructions. In Sofia I dare say they would hang you for what you have done, and I see no reason why I should not spare them the trouble here and now. What have you to say?"

Not one of the Gipsies raised his voice in the Turk's behalf, although I knew for a fact that they would not have sold him to me for any sum I could have named.

"What use is there for me to say anything, mademoiselle?" replied Kemil Bey calmly. "You seem to have the power to do what you will."

"I have," she answered, and dropped her head in thought.

At this stage of the proceedings I judged it wise to interfere.

"If you will pardon me, Guspojita Vavaroff," I said, "I see nothing to be gained by taking this man's life. He is a gallant fellow and a soldier who has been performing a duty distasteful to him because it was for his country, and who has done it as cleanly and honorably as he could."

"No spy's work is clean or honorable, Mr. Blair," she answered coldly.

"Pardon me, mademoiselle, I did not say it was," I answered with some heat. "I merely said that he had performed his duty as cleanly and honorably as he could under the circumstances. Why can't you let him go? I dare say he'll give you his parole not to return to Bulgaria again—in fact, he won't dare to anyway."

She raised her eyes to mine for the first time since she had unveiled herself in the torch-light.

"If you wish it, Mr. Blair, it shall be so," she said. "I did not mean to dispute your opinion."

You could have knocked me over with a feather. This girl, who had domineered over as wild a gang of freebooters as ever cut a throat, answered me with the meekness of a schoolgirl! But more was to come. She turned again to Kokalji.

"There is no use in riding back tonight," she said. "We will camp here. You will take your orders from the Guspodine Blair. Whatever he says you will do, on the pain of my displeasure."

Kokalji salaamed deeply.

"The Lady has spoken," he said.

HE BARKED a few orders right and left, and the circle of men around us broke up into working parties that picketed the horses, cut wood and drew water, and commenced the manufacturing of the luscious Gipsy stew in the deep broad-bottomed pots that they set over the fires. After seeing to it that poor Kemil was comfortable and safely guarded, I turned my attention to my rescuer. She had dismounted beside a fire which was set apart from the others and, seated upon a pile of brushwood heaped for her by one of the Gipsies—all of whom seemed to consider themselves her slaves—was staring into the dancing flames, immersed in thought.

The bright light was merciless in showing up her face, disclosing great black circles under her eyes and hollows of fatigue that made its accustomed beauty look worn and gaunt. I am not an emotional man, but I

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felt a gusty pang of compassion for this plucky girl who had followed a blank trail for four days to rescue me. She was a friend worth having. I said so, and she smiled tiredly.

"Of course," I added, "there is no use in trying to tell you what I feel about this. It goes too deep for that. I'll simply say that I shall remember it always, and always consider myself in your debt."

"Not in my debt particularly," she replied. "Not really, Mr. Blair. I'd like to claim the credit, if I might honestly; but I can't. It was for the cause. You see you are indispensable to us. We had to have you. You are our trump card."

She spoke kindly; but I felt an unaccountable sense of disappointment, a hurt feeling that she should consider me in such an impersonal manner. Perhaps she saw it, for she added:

"I'll not deny that it was extra nice that you were the man to be rescued, Mr. Blair. It wouldn't have been so easy otherwise."

We sat silent for several minutes, while she pulled Stoyan's ears and stared into the flames.

"Where are the rest of your party?" I asked finally.

"The rest of my party?" she repeated.

"Yes; did you outride them by much?"

"Oh, I thought you knew," she answered casually. "I came alone—except for Stoyan.

"It was best," she went on hastily, perceiving the look on my face. "You see, I know this country like a book. I probably have more influence along the frontier than any other person, especially with these men. So as soon as we found out just what had happened to you I made up my mind what to do—and I did it. Others would have hindered me and kept down my pace."

"Did you tell the minister?"

"I told him something of my plan," she smiled wanly. "No, not all of it."

I regarded her with considerable admiration.

"You are far and away the pluckiest young woman I have ever known," I said. "But you are absolutely worn out, and I am going to command you to drink a cup of hot soup and go straight to bed."

"How nice of you to be so masterful!" she answered with a trace of the old spritely manner she had shown in our first conversation together. "It is good to be hectored after being one's own mistress for four days. You are very kind, Mr. Blair."

And she smiled at me. I muttered something rather inane, I believe, and went off and swore at the man who was fixing the soup.

Presently when it was ready I sent him to her with it, watched her drink it, and then seized half a dozen blankets and cloaks from as many protesting owners and carried them to where she lay in a forlorn little heap on the pile of fir boughs before the fire, fast asleep. With them I made a more comfortable nest for her, picked her up without waking her, and deposited her in it; then pulled some of the covers around her and went off, Stoyan having observed all my movements, I may say, with a kind of proprietary interest that was somewhat disconcerting, until I fully appreciated that he understood I meant his mistress no harm.

CHAPTER IX

I HEAR A STRANGE STORY

IT WAS dawn when I awoke, and the camp was already bustling into life. My first thought was for Masoya, but a glance across at her resting-place revealed only a tumbled heap of blankets. I was about to question one of the Gipsies when the lady herself appeared from a faint trail through the bosks that led down to a brawling rivulet.

All the fatigue and the look of strained anxiety that had marked her face the night before had vanished. She was rosy and smiling, and waved a hand to me in cheerful greeting.

"Good morning, Mr. Blair," she called. "I feel ever so much better after my sleep. But don't you want a wash? There is the dearest little pool down there to your right! And when you're through come up and have breakfast."

But I lingered a moment.

"You look as fit as if riding night and day were a pastime!" I exclaimed. "How the dickens do you manage it?"

"Oh, that's nothing," she answered carelessly. "We live in the saddle, we of the frontier. I dare say I could outride any of these fellows—which wouldn't be saying very much, Heaven knows. But hurry up; we must be moving."

"You're not starting at once?" I

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expostulated. "Why, the sun's barely had a respectable chance to get up."

She laughed.

"If you're tired, of course——"

"Oh," I said, with pique showing in my voice, "I'm ready if you are. It was only——"

She laughed again.

"Mr. Blair, I fear you're incorrigible. Do you know you had an appointment with a king several days ago, which you did not keep—and kings do not like to be kept waiting any longer than is necessary?"

"I obey your Majesty's commands," I answered with a sweeping bow, and backed off down the path.

As I straightened and turned around to enter the path to the pool my eyes rested on her face for a brief second, and a thrill of concern shot through me at what I saw there. Her eyes were fixed on me with a look of puzzled anxiety, mingled with something approaching terror. But almost instantly she veiled their expression with a crooked smile of derision, and walked over to where Kokalji was directing his men who were tending to the horses.

When I returned she was standing by the simmering stewpots, hands clasped in front of her, buried deep in thought. So, not wishing to disturb her, I went over to where Kemil Bey sat glumly, guarded by two of the Gipsies. He tried to look cheerful when he saw me, but it was a miserable failure.

"Well, child of Fortune, what do you purpose doing with your humble captive?" he asked with a pretense at light-heartedness.

"What would you recommend yourself?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"You are a generous captor. I prefer to leave it in your hands."

"I suppose I really ought to take you back to Sofia," I said. "But curse it, Kemil, I don't like to think of that. I'll tell you what: Have you got any plans, any illegitimate information from your crowd in Sofia?"

He flushed.

"That's not fair——"

"Oh, yes, it is," I cut in. "If you have anything like that and hand it over to me, with your word of honor that it's all you've got, I'll let you go. That is, I'll send you to the frontier under escort—and, of course, I don't need to tell you that it would be dangerous to appear in Bulgaria again. What do you say?"

"What can I say?" He raised eyebrows and shoulders as only a Turk—or a Parisian—can do. "Your proposition is perfectly correct. There is no use in making a martyr of myself." He reached into a pocket and hauled out a long envelope. "This is all I have—I give you my word. And although I haven't had a chance to go through them thoroughly, they look to me like very poor stakes for a man to risk his neck on."

"Good!" I said. "Now, are you ready to leave at once?"

"Nothing could please me better."

He rose and stretched his arms.

"Already I begin to feel like a free man."

"Perhaps it will make you understand how I felt a few short hours ago," I said.

"By Allah, you must think me a pig, Blair!" he exclaimed. "But I do understand it, just as I appreciate your kindness. And believe me, as I told you once before, this isn't the kind of work I'd have chosen for myself. Next time we meet I hope it will be on the battlefield, where I can prove to you that I really am a soldier."

"Say no more, Kemil," I told him. "After all, it's for a man's country just as much as fighting on the battlefield; so why feel dishonored?"

"It may be the same, but it doesn't make you feel the same," he answered doggedly.

There was nothing more to say, so I shook hands with him and walked over to Kokalji to give orders to have the Turk started for the frontier at once, under escort. Ten minutes later, as I sat beside Masoya eating a Gipsy breakfast of stew, Kemil Bey rode out of camp, once more his care-free self. He bowed to her and waved a hand to me.

Masoya had been preoccupied when I joined her beside the fire, and my own thoughts had plunged me likewise into self-absorption. So I ate on abstractedly, saying nothing because, as I thought, there was no call for words. Apparently, however, I had misconstrued her wishes.

"You are not very entertaining, Mr. Blair," she remarked suddenly.

I looked at her in blank astonishment.

"I said you were not very entertaining," she repeated.

"I—— But I thought you did not wish to talk," I stammered. "I did not——"

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She rose impatiently to her feet, a thundercloud of passionate anger masking her brow and robbing her face of much of the sweet womanliness which was its principal charm.

"We must be going," she said in harsh impatience. "We have delayed overlong as it is. Come!"

The Gipsies were all ready for us. Kokalji had the horses led out, saddled and bridled. Stoyan, the hound, appeared at the same time, having been amusing himself by an early rabbit chase, if a fluff of fur hanging from his jowl was any proof.

Masoya mounted, declining my assistance, and said a few words to the leader of the band. We cantered off. Kokalji and all the rest of his ruffians stood there in the trail as long as we were in sight, watching the tall, willowy figure of the woman beside me until we reached a turn and they disappeared from our ken. Their odd, emotionless reverence for her puzzled and also somewhat annoyed me. But I was not so much interested in it as I might have been if she had treated me differently.

So presently I reined in slightly and rode a half length in the rear. She never turned her head nor condescended to notice me for a distance of several miles, although more than once Stoyan looked up at my face as if in bewilderment at the cause of the estrangement he sensed between his two human companions.

WE HAD been riding all of an hour, I should judge, when I noticed a great buildin —or rather mass of buildings—on the crest of the frontier range of hills, far off to our right. For a moment I thought it must be one of the mountain monasteries that have survived the centuries in this war-worn land; but as I glanced closer there was something very unreligious about the massive walls, battlemented and machicolated, the ponderous towers, the sweep of bastion and curtain.

What I saw appeared to be some strange survival of feudal days, when Turk and Christian contended for the country, and both warred against the Byzantine Greeks. Strange I had never heard of this structure! I had not thought such medieval fortifications existed outside Tirnovo and one or two Danube towns.

In my interest I had drawn over to the side of the trail, forgetting entirely that I had a companion. Consequently I whirled about quickly in my seat when a voice spoke at my elbow.

"That is Czarigrad, Mr. Blair," it said in distinctly chastened tones.

"Czarigrad?" I repeated in bewilderment. "Czarigrad—why, that means the Place of the Emperor, does it not—Constantinople?"

"Yes," she said musingly. "The Place of the Emperor; that is the ancient name. But there have been many Czarigrads. Very few people have ever heard of this one. This is the very wildest spot on the frontier, and visitors are not encouraged. Do you like it?"

"I don't pretend to be an expert on antique architecture," I replied, "but it looks to be a remarkably splendid pile—in first-rate preservation, if one may judge at this distance."

"I am glad you think so," she answered quietly. "You see, it belongs to me."

Then all in a flash it came over me that the Gipsies had called her the Lady of Czarigrad. And I looked at her curiously—this strange girl with a story I did not know, this girl who had ridden day and night to rescue me and then quarreled over a misunderstood silence.

"Didn't you know about it?" she asked in evident surprise.

"No."

"Do you really mean that?" she pressed.

"Certainly," I said. "How could I have known?"

"Well, you disturbed me so when you showed you knew about me this morning, that I—well, I thought you might know everything," she answered with an embarrassed laugh.

I looked at the girl in even greater perplexity than before.

"I'm sure I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about," I said.

She flushed.

"If you're saying that because of—of the way I—I acted this morning, I hope you'll believe that I'm sorry. I was perfectly horrid. I suppose it was because you had startled me so before."

"But how?" I cried. "How do you mean that I startled you?"

We had drawn rein and were facing each other in the middle of the trail.

"It was when you were going down to the pool," she said haltingly. "I never dreamed

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that you might know my secret. I have always meant to tell you," she hastened to add, "but I was not expecting that you would find it out for yourself. And so few know it."

"My dear young lady," I said in desperation, "I am more in despair than ever. I haven't the slightest idea what you are talking about. I don't know your secret nor anything about it. Nobody has told it to me, and I have neither the curiosity nor the ability to pry it out for myself. Let us ride on."

She glanced at me sidewise from under her lashes; then without a word pulled her horse around beside me, and we rode on. There is no more ridiculous position for a man to be in, I think, than to be supposed to possess acquaintance with knowledge of which he is totally ignorant. So I rode along, no more amiable in disposition than I had been when we started.

Perhaps something of this showed in my churlish manner, for presently I felt a hand on my bridle-arm, and I turned to look into Masoya Vavaroff's eyes.

"I don't want you to think I have been teasing you," she begged. "I am sorry I was cross to you this morning. Now won't you say you forgive me? It's such a lovely day!"

I gripped her fingers as hard as I dared.

"Forgive me," I answered. "It's I who am a surly bear. Let's forget everything and enjoy life again.

She smiled at me in a way that made me cease to wonder over her power.

"No; I refuse to accede to your suggestion. And I'm going to tell you everything."

"But——" I started to interpose.

"There's no use trying to head me off," she insisted. "I'm going to take advantage of this opportunity to bore you thoroughly with my life-history. You would have to know it some time, Mr. Blair, and I should prefer that you hear it from my lips. It was because I thought you had heard at least some of it from another person that I was so much put out at breakfast."

"All right," I answered. "But I want you to understand that you do not need to tell me. Oh, yes, I'm curious enough, but —— Well, you understand."

She glanced at me shyly.

"I think I do," she murmured.

AFTER that we rode along in silence for five minutes, while she sat with her head dropped forward on her breast. Then she looked up to where the walls and towers of that strange, fairy castle of Czarigrad loomed across the hills. A mist sprang up in her eyes and involuntarily, it seemed, she stretched her arms toward it.

"Ah, I love it so!" she exclaimed. "It was there I was born and brought up, Mr. Blair. The happiest days of my life were spent in that place. Some day you shall visit it, and I will entertain you in the old style—with bear-hunts and great banquets and festivals, as my ancestors would have done. Do you know, Mr. Blair, that my ancestors once ruled all this country about here, from the Danube to the Ægean—aye, and beyond?—Yes, you may well look surprised."

She drew herself up proudly in her saddle. "Mr. Blair, the blood of the Palæologi runs in my veins, with that of the Assens. I am of the Emperors of the East and of the Czars of that old Bulgaria which fell prostrate centuries ago, fighting desperately alone to bar the Turk from Europe.

"If I had my lawful birthright I should own Constantinople, Thrace, Macedonia, Epirus, Greece, Albania, old Servia, Novi-Bazar, Montenegro, Dalmatia, Bosnia, the Herzegovina, Servia, Bulgaria, Roumania —yes, and part of Hungary and beyond; with all the islands of the sea, Syria, Judea, Palestine, and whole kingdoms and provinces besides. I will show the records and our roll of honors to you when you come to Czarigrad. They make an imposing show; but of them all today I have only the few square miles that stretch around Czarigrad —only those and the fragments of a legendary power and a mighty birthright. A truly mighty birthright, Mr. Blair!"

She rode nearer and dropped her voice to a lower key.

"And this is my story, which very few know, and which is the reason for what people are pleased to call my 'power' in Sofia. I have a birthright—a birthright which has been neglected for centuries by my ancestors, partly because they were not equal to it, I dare say, but more because the times were not ripe for its manifestation. Now—who knows? I might see fit to proclaim myself for what I am, and consequently I am a

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person of some influence with his Majesty the Czar."

"Just how well do you know Ferdinand?" I asked quietly.

"Well enough to know what you mean," she answered with a quick glance. "But Ferdinand knows me. Also he has a son, and the sons of Balkan rulers are not considered very good matches in Western Europe; so why would it not be a good stroke of statecraft to cut the Gordian knot and choose a wife who would unite in her person all the ancient royal lines of the Peninsula?"

"So that's the plan!"

I'll admit I was surprised—more surprised than I should have cared to admit at the time. And I didn't like the idea at all.

"You don't seem to appreciate the honor his Majesty contemplates granting me," she remarked presently.

"I do not!" I retorted.

To my amazement she smiled at me frankly and openly.

"Thank you," she said.

"I don't know what you are thanking me for," I said hotly. "But if you think you are going to get my approval for any such harebrained plan—yes, I said harebrained —— It's more than that. It's wicked, abominable! I tell you——"

She dropped her reins and clapped both hands in impish glee.

"Oh, how lovely! I do so like to see you angry, Mr. Blair!"

With that I put a curb on my feelings.

"Well, you won't find me so easy again," I remarked as coolly as I could. "Anyhow, it ought not to be hard to laugh at a man riding horseback in the wreck of a dress-suit."

Her face sobered instantly at the first mention of my plight.

"There is a village not far from here where I had planned to get fresh horses," she said. "I think I can also manage to find you a costume more appropriate to the country and the work."

She spoke soberly enough, and her face never twitched; but I could have sworn there was a twinkle in her eye. After that we rode on in peace.

At noon we reached the village she had spoken of, where they fed us, gave us fresh horses, and provided me with a decent peasant's suit—for all of which they protested they did not want money if the service was for the Lady of Czarigrad.

All the afternoon we rode, and by evening reached a railroad-station. The next morning we were back in Sofia.

CHAPTER X

OUT OF THE FRYING-PAN——

IN SOFIA the newsboys were shouting extras telling of Montenegrin victories in Albania and Novi-Bazar, and reports of movements by the other allied States. We did not stop to buy these, however. Masoya's blue roadster was waiting outside the station, and in this we hurried to the Kurtsky villa. The minister was absent at a Cabinet meeting, and Masoya decided to drop me and go on home.

"I have many things to do," she said as she bade me good-by. "Remember, we are to go riding tomorrow; and I shall take you to call on his Majesty."

And with a wave of her hand this remarkable girl, who had lived at a rate few men could stand for the last five days, disappeared in a cloud of dust.

As for me, I went up to my room, took a bath, donned decent clothes and slipped a pistol into my pocket, resolving never to stir again without it. When I returned downstairs I found Boris lounging in the hall.

"Ha, will-o'-the-wisp!" he exclaimed. "Back again! It seems that you are easily kidnapped, eh?"

"Naturally, when my friends don't take better care of me," I retorted. "And I notice you let a girl go to my rescue all by herself."

"As to your first comment," he acknowledged easily, "I am out of court. The charge is true. So far as the second is concerned, the girl was Masoya."

"Well, I'll be on the lookout for them next time," I said.

Boris cast aside his air of magnificent disdain and gripped my hand.

"Seriously, old chap," he answered, "we were terribly worried about you—until Masoya announced that she would go after you. Of course, nobody could get away from her in that frontier country."

"I'm sure she must appreciate your confidence in her," I returned sarcastically.

He laughed.

"I know you're dying to tell me all the adventures you passed through in such romantic company," he said slyly. "But

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unfortunately Uncle Vassili has just returned and left word that he was waiting for you in his study."

THE minister jumped to his feet when I entered.

"St. Demetrius, but I'm glad to see you safe and sound again!" he exclaimed. "We've laid von Griffenstein by the heels—caught him with contraband photographs of the southern forts. And your friend the Anhalt sticks close in the Austrian ministry. Altogether we made things rather unpleasant for them.

"But in the long run the incident is going to do us good. It made quite an impression on his Majesty. It proved to him better than words could have done the importance they attached to your assistance."

"The wheels have been going around since I dropped out of sight," I suggested.

"With a vengeance." The minister sighed softly. "The Montenegrins are wholly out of hand; the Serbs are all but accusing us of using them as catspaws; the Western Powers are waking up, and Turkey has become roused to her danger. We stand on the actual threshold of great events. The next two days will decide everything. Or I should say that you will decide everything tomorrow."

"I?"

"Yes, you. At the Cabinet council this morning I told his Majesty the proposition in detail, and he, as well as my colleagues, was intensely interested. The Czar even said that if you could arrange such a tentative loan there could be no doubt in his mind that our course was the one to follow."

"That's going pretty far for Ferdinand, isn't it?" I continued.

"Rather," answered the minister.

"You can rely upon me," I assured him. "After the treatment I've been accorded I'd do anything to checkmate the rascals. But while we are on this subject please tell me why you never informed me about this other project behind all your surface plotting and counterplotting."

"You mean——" he questioned.

"I mean this plan to unite Miss Vavaroff's claims with the Bulgarian throne."

"So," he answered slowly, "she told you, then?"

"Yes."

"Well," he returned, "I did not tell you for several reasons. In the first place, it is not my secret. In the second place, it is not an official project. In the third place, what knowledge I have of it came to me from Masoya herself. Not even the Czar has spoken of it to me.

"It is a big idea if it can be handled," I said. "Only it can't."

"Why not?" asked the minister. "If we fight this war and win there will be much territory to divide. Bulgaria will get most of it because she will do the lion's share of the work. The Turks will be driven across the Bosporus. Then there will be a burst of Christian spirit and feeling throughout the whole Peninsula, a wave of fraternity and Panslavism. The Greeks may be jealous because Bulgarians attain the place the Byzantine Emperors used to hold; but after all we Bulgars of today are as closely akin to the Byzantine Emperors as are your modern Greeks. It's not such a vision as you might suppose."

"Theoretically what you say is true," I admitted. "Practically——" I shrugged my shoulders.

"The wise man does not prophesy—more especially where politics is concerned," he replied. "Mark you, I do not prophesy."

"You are a sly old fox," I said.

"I am a man who tries to think ahead," he answered earnestly.

"If I could think as far ahead as you, I should consider myself foresighted," I returned as I rose to leave him. "Well, I'm off to pick up Boris and prove to all Sofia that I am back safe and sound."

"Good!" he exclaimed. "Walk about a little and let people see you. It will have a good effect."

I left him immersed in the papers heaped on his desk, just beginning his day's work, and went out to find Boris. The dandy of the Tirnovo Regiment was standing under the *porte-cochère*, flicking his boots with a riding-switch.

"Ah, there you are, my babe from the wood!" he remarked at sight of me. "Have you thoughts of luncheon in your head?"

I AGREED, and we sauntered out into the street and struck off across the Great Square of the *Sobranje*, with the Parliament House on one side and the huge statue of the Czar-Liberator on the other. On the way, I told him in detail the story of my adventures. But the tale was disjointed by reason of frequent interruptions.

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All the persons we met who knew me or had at least a bowing acquaintance with Boris must stop and exclaim over my safe return. There was much excitement n the club itself. Speculation over the ultimate course of events was running high.

Presently a considerable group of officers gathered around us. Some of them I had met before, but the majority were strangers to me. They were a pleasant lot of fellows, and when Boris was summoned away to answer a telephone-call I was made to feel thoroughly at home.

But suddenly there was a lull in the conversation, and a number of the younger men stood up. I looked around for the cause of the interruption and saw the bull neck and swarthy, insolent face of the man who had brought the news of Montenegro's declaration of war to the British ministry the night that I was kidnapped—the man Masoya Vavaroff had warned me against, Constantine Gortcheff. He was pushing his way between the crowded tables toward our group, and even at that distance I could see that his face was flushed and his eyes bloodshot. In front of our table he came to a halt and stood with legs straddled apart, leering down at us.

All except one or two of the officers with me were of inferior rank to him, and so rose deferentially. Of course I kept my seat, and as soon as I saw what had caused the interruption I resumed my conversation with an infantry general who sat next to me.

But at the first sound of Gortcheff's voice I recognized that he meant trouble, and I broke off and swung around so that I could look squarely into his face.

"Sit down, gentlemen, sit down," he said a trifle impatiently. "I came here only to meet the American money-lender who was rescued from brigands by a petticoat."

There was a gasp, and then silence.

"I am the only person here who in any way corresponds to your description, General," I said coolly. "But——"

"You must have enjoyed yourself, eh?" he said with a wink. The look and the tone made the words inexpressibly foul.

A youngster sitting across the table from me, a captain in Boris' regiment, interfered at this stage.

"Mr. Blair is a guest in this club, General Gortcheff," he remonstrated. "He is a guest of a brother officer of mine. It is inexcusable——"

"Silence, sir!" Gortcheff bellowed at him, and followed this up with a string of adjectives that could not be reproduced.

"Better stay out of this, Captain," I advised. Then I turned on Gortcheff. He was leaning slightly forward across the table, his face working with passion.

"You don't believe in fine work, do you?" I asked him casually. "You like your effects broad? Well, here is one that should suit you."

And I pushed my flat hand into his face with sufficient force to upset him and send him sprawling on the floor. He was up in a second, tugging at his saber, but a couple of higher officers leaped forward and restrained him. Trembling with rage and cursing incoherently, he struggled between them, more like a wild beast than a human being.

"We might as well get this over with at once, gentlemen," I said to the officers who had gathered about us. "Is there some place in the club where we would have room for a bout?"

"The fencing-gallery," suggested the general I had been talking to. "But there is really no need for your taking cognizance of this insult, Mr. Blair. We are all witnesses that——"

"I think I'd prefer to," I said as quietly as I could. I was really boiling over with anger just beginning to awaken.

At this moment the circle of uniforms heaved and split asunder, and Boris Kurtsky burst through.

"What the devil is the meaning of this?" he blurted out. "What——"

"Your pig of an American friend has insulted me," foamed Gortcheff. "But he can't hide behind a petticoat now!"

"Faugh!" exclaimed Boris, as he turned to me. "You know you don't need to notice this fellow's filth, Dan. Be sensible." Then quietly, into my ear, "Confound it, man, he's the best swordsman in the Army—or was, until he took to living the pace of the court set."

"That settles it, then," I answered. "I'm not afraid of the ruffian. You can either stand clear or else act as my second, Boris."

"What are you so savage about?" demanded Boris plaintively. "There'll be the devil to pay tomorrow about this. Why are you so keen for blood-letting?"

"I won't kill him."

"No, but suppose he kills you? Uncle Vassili—— Oh, well, if you're bent on it!"

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And he went into hasty conference with an artillery officer, who had been detailed, much against his will, to act as second for Gortcheff.

FIVE minutes later we were upstairs in a long, high-ceiled room with a bare floor, well lighted and airy—the club fencing-gallery. Despite protests from Boris and his own second, Gortcheff had insisted upon regulation sabers, which meant nasty chopping wounds. The bout was to be to a finish or until one or the other of us was disabled.

Stripped to our shirts, we took our places in the middle of a cleared area surrounded by solid ranks of officers. I would have preferred fighting in private, but Boris briefly explained to me that if anything happened it would be better to have plenty of witnesses. We held our sabers with points resting on the floor, waiting the word, our seconds standing behind each of us, the senior officer present standing between us and to one side. It was he who gave the word to engage.

Gortcheff's blade flashed into the air like a streak of flame and darted toward me. The animal rage which had possessed the man up to this moment had boiled itself out. His face was carved into a death-mask by sheer cold hatred. It told nothing, revealed nothing. Only by his eyes, narrow slits of blazing, shifting light, could I in any way gage the intents and purposes that animated his sword arm.

At that, my task was sufficiently difficult. The man was a human dynamo, a thing of springs and coils, leaping here and there, bounding waist high into the air one moment, crouching like a cat on the floor the next. And always in front of him flickered some three feet of lambent steel.

Every ounce of energy in my body was required to meet that remorseless, murderous assault. Time and again his blade missed me by a mere hair's breadth. Twice it ripped my shirt. Sometimes he used the point; then of a sudden and without warning he would shift to the edge and deal me a swinging blow that clanged against my guard and brought me to my knee.

But I gained courage from the fact that for all his desperate assault I was scatheless. I knew his kind of fighter. Fierce and dauntless in initial attack, they crumple up after a prolonged resistance. All their brilliance oozes from them. I knew instinctively that if I could hold out against him ten minutes longer, the fight was mine.

And I think he knew it, too, for the intricacy of his attack developed new puzzles, new tricks and feints. There was never a chance to stop for breath. The swish, clatter, *cling-clang, jingle-jangle* of steel on steel echoed through the room. Our sabers purred like hungry cats as they swung through the air. Our panting breath answered them. The man in front of me redoubled his efforts. He ceased to be a normal human figure to me. He seemed to have legs enormously long, an arm which reached clear across the room.

It was at this period of the combat that he sprang a trick which all but finished me. Suddenly darting back, after a particularly vicious thrust which barely missed my chest, he shifted his blade to his left hand as quick as thought and came at me again.

For a second I faltered and I could almost feel the click of his guard against my ribs, the slither of the blade through my flesh, until a dripping six inches of it stood out behind my backbone. But in the nick of time I regained my self-control, and by an old trick of the fencing-school dropped to one side, so that the vengeful steel missed me.

From that time I no longer feared him. As the minutes slipped by I realized that it was he who was giving up hope. A set look of desperation crept across his mask-like face. The light in his eyes flared brighter, then charred to a somber dullness. His wrist weakened under my thrusts and cuts.

All about me I sensed the relaxation of the ranks of onlookers which told that they, too, knew the dangerous period had been passed. And it may have been cruel of me, but I took delight in playing with the fellow, in frightening him, in leading him on to believe that I had hidden death just around the corner from him.

He was sobbing for breath, the sweat streaming down his face, when I finally took mercy on him, brushed his saber aside, and ripped him up the sword-arm so that his muscles would be incapacitated for this kind of work for some time to come.

"To be sure, General," I said politely, as I dropped my point, "by rights I should disable your other arm, since you fight with both of them. But I will be merciful."

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He looked at me dully as a surgeon bound up his arm. But he made no reply, nor did the hate in his face die out. If anything, the glassy look of his eyes brightened as if some untapped source of venom had suddenly shot new life into his veins.

But the next instant Boris and his friends surged around me and bore me off to the café to drink my health and fight over the battle point by point.

CHAPTER XI

THINGS BEGIN TO HAPPEN

"IF YOU think I am going to begin by congratulating you on being alive, you are mistaken," was Masoya's greeting. "I have decided that you are nothing but a schoolboy, always in mischief unless there is some one around to look after you."

"Oh, come, my dear! You are too hard on him; far too hard on him," interceded my friend, the minister.

We were standing in the hallway of the Kurtsky villa the next morning, waiting for the horses to be brought around so that Masoya and I might start for the Palace.

"No, I am not too hard on him," she contradicted. "The idea! Dueling like a silly cadet just out of the Military School! Suppose you had been killed! Have you stopped to consider what the loss of your life would mean?"

"At least you admit that it is my life," I commented somewhat peevishly.

"I admit nothing of the kind," she returned. "It is not your life. It belongs to all of us, to Bulgaria. I was even so conceited as to suppose that I was allowed to have some claim upon it."

"Well, I have nothing more to say," I answered grouchily. "I did the only thing I could have done in the circumstances. If there had been any other way out of it I would gladly have followed it. But there was not."

"By all accounts the affair was very correctly managed," said the minister softly.

"There you are again!" cried Masoya disdainfully. "Treating it as if it were simply a boy-officer's bickering! The stakes with which Mr. Blair has bound himself up are too important to be lightly risked in such a manner. Moreover, he managed the affair in the worst possible way. If he had to fight a duel with Constantine Gortcheff he should have killed him. As it is Gortcheff is alive, and we can reckon upon his undying hatred, doubly intensified by the humiliation to which he has been subjected.

The hoofs of the horses sounded on the driveway at this moment, and I breathed a sigh of relief. If such a conversation must be prosecuted any further, I preferred that it should be in the open air, and without old Vassili Kurtsky standing by, slyly egging Masoya on.

The worst of it was that he had said the same things to me the night before, and that I had long since come to a realization of their justice. And there is nothing more unpleasant than for a man to appreciate that he has made a fool of himself. Hang it all, why hadn't I killed Gortcheff while I was about it? It sounds brutal, but I knew it would have been the safest thing in the long run. The fellow would be a constant menace at our heels, from now on.

"The horses are ready," said Masoya. "Come, we must get started. I only hope that this matter has not served to prejudice his Majesty against Mr. Blair."

Vassili Kurtsky dropped an eyelid in my direction as I followed her out under the *porte-cochère*, but I was not in any humor to acknowledge it. We mounted in silence, and had ridden fully a block before my companion spoke the first word.

"I'm afraid you will think me a scold, Mr. Blair," she said suddenly, "but I want you to believe that in all I have said it was the question of your own personal safety that was uppermost in my mind. General Gortcheff is tremendously powerful. He is closer to the Czar than any other officer in the Army. We have reason to think that he has close connections with those in power at Vienna also. He is a bad man to have for an enemy."

The temper all oozed out of me.

"Every word you have said has been gospel truth," I admitted. "But I want you to believe just one thing. I could not have avoided the quarrel; it was palpably forced upon me, in—in—well, in such a way that I could not avoid it. The mistake I made, as you said, was in not killing him. And I can't really say that I'm sorry. I should hate to kill a man in a duel."

She shot a quick look of sympathy at me, and nodded her head.

"I can understand how you feel about it," she assented. "After all, it's rather weak

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and womanish to bemoan a deed accomplished; and if anybody's shoulders are broad enough to bear the responsibility for their own works, I think yours are."

I had not recovered from this compliment and reversal of mood when we swung in past the statuesque sentries who stood with presented arms on either side of the Palace gate. The low roof of the yellow building gleamed over a narrow strip of park intervening between it and the wall which separated it from the street. Above the roof the royal ensign drooped lazily, showing that the sovereign was in residence.

We trotted up the driveway and halted under a *porte-cochère* a trifle more elaborate than that before the minister's house. Several guardsmen ran out of a kiosk at one side of the entrance and took our bridles as we dismounted, and the lieutenant in command marched up with an inquisitorial salute. At sight of Masoya, however, he fell back with a deep bow, plainly conceding her status as a privileged visitor.

"I will inform the aide-de-camp in attendance that you are here, mademoiselle," he said without any other formality, and ushered us into a waiting-room.

There was nobody else there, so Masoya took the opportunity to give me all the court gossip.

"And the Czar is chafing especially at the necessity of staying here in Sofia," she wound up. "You know he hates it. He would much rather be at Varna or one of the chateaux in the Danube provinces."

The curtains of an inner doorway were pushed aside as she spoke, and a handsome young officer stepped into the room.

"His Majesty will receive you," he said.

We followed him up a wide staircase, into a long corridor on the upper floor, and finally into a big, sunny room walled with bookcases and occupied by several massive tables, groaning under piles of sorted papers.

"Be seated, please," said the aide, pointing to two chairs by one of the windows; and he disappeared through a swinging door that led to an inner room.

WE HAD scarcely made ourselves comfortable when the door swung back and a big man in an ordinary morning suit limped through. A single look at his gray beard and great hawk-nose, his sleepily threatening eyes and loosely modeled jaw would have told any one that he was Ferdinand, Czar of all the Bulgars, who had succeeded to a precarious throne—which he had proceeded to make secure.

"Ah, good morning, my dear," he said easily to Masoya. "So you've brought Mr. Blair? That's good."

He gave me his hand cordially enough, but all the time I could feel his sleepy hawk's eyes probing my face, hunting, hunting for the weak spot which might enable him to bend me to his will.

"I am more than pleased to meet you, Mr. Blair," he added frankly. "Few foreigners have done so much for my little kingdom as yourself."

"That is very kind of your Majesty," I murmured.

"Please be seated," he continued. "You do not come to me as a stranger, Mr. Blair. Many people have been singing your praises to me; and then, too, you seem to be the sort of man who meets with adventures." He laughed softly. "Yes, my Chief of Police has admitted himself extra worried when he has you to look after, besides the rest of Sofia. I trust you suffered no serious inconvenience during your recent kidnapping experience?"

"Nothing of consequence, your Majesty," I replied dryly.

"That is good." Despite the inanity of his words his eyes never left my face. They roamed from feature to feature without meeting my own glance, shifting, probing, stabbing at my soul, in the effort to reveal my inmost mental processes. But I think he realized the uselessness of it. My face was an inflexible mask. As for Masoya, she sat and looked out of the window, patting her crop against her boot.

"That is good," the Czar repeated again. "I should not like to think you had suffered; for in a way, they tell me, the brigands who kidnapped you were working against me."

"I think there is no doubt that they were, Sire," I assured him.

"And so you believe in Bulgaria's destiny?" he said next—shifting his attack.

"You mean?" I returned.

"Why, as I understand it, Mr. Blair," he went on, speaking in a casual tone of voice, "you are of the opinion that Bulgaria would be justified in resorting to war to retrieve the present lamentable situation in Macedonia. In fact, Kurtsky tells me you are even prepared to advance us money for military expenses."

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"Messages delivered by intermediaries are often misleading, Sire," I answered. "Perhaps it would be as well if I explained my position personally to you."

"Certainly, sir; certainly."

"Then," I proceeded, "it is true that I believe in Bulgaria's destiny—with certain limitations. I believe that with the aid of her Allies she could crush Turkey. I believe that the situation in Macedonia is sufficiently bad to warrant action by her and her Allies. I believe that if swift action is taken without giving Western Europe time to think matters over, a war can be fought and won, without interference by the great Powers. Finally I stand prepared to offer a loan of twenty-five million dollars at six per cent. after Bulgaria has won two pitched battles, providing the rest of her Allies have done their share."

Again I had been subjected to that uncanny, flickering stare. All the time that I talked he was studying me, weighing my words against the play of my features, seeking for hidden meanings.

"That's all very well, Mr. Blair," he said after a short silence. "But you and these other hot-heads seem to forget that I shall be gambling my crown on this play of yours."

"A good many others will be gambling their lives and fortunes, your Majesty," I answered wearily. "I am offering to gamble twenty-five million dollars on it."

"After the fight is practically won," he objected.

"As you know," I returned coldly, "the loan I offer you will serve to clinch your victory. It is the prospect of this loan which deprives the enterprise of its uncertainty. All you have to do is to make the proper use of the magnificent army you have been building up for years for just such a purpose. Anybody who knows conditions knows that that army, properly handled, can capture Constantinople."

"It sounds very easy when you talk about it, Mr. Blair," he replied. "But I am an old man, and I have brought my people through many dangerous crises to a state of reasonable prosperity. I shall take a great responsibility upon my shoulders if I put them to such a supreme test now. Might it not be better to let well enough alone?"

"And remain the ruler of some four million souls, when you might double your actual territory and become the head of a military confederation that would embrace all southeastern Europe," I returned.

"That is your sincere opinion?"

"It is," I said.

His face had lit up at my description of a new Balkan Empire, with himself as head of it; and I knew that any semblance of opposition that had lingered in his mind was swept away.

"Well," he said slowly, "contrary to the opinion of some of your friends, all of my advisers do not recommend this war. In yielding to your recommendations—— By the way, as I understand it, there are no strings tied to that tentative loan, other than the conditions you enumerated?"

"None whatsoever, your Majesty," I replied.

"You need not worry about your people, Sire," Masoya interrupted at this point for the first time. "They are wild for you to declare war, and victory will finally cement their allegiance to your dynasty."

"Ah! Yes, yes, my dear," he answered petulantly. "But you, too, forget that I belong to a gild myself, as my cousin of Italy once said—the gild of kings. And as it happens I shall have the very devil of a time with my fellow gild-members if I take your advice and plunge my country into war."

"The answer to that, Sire," she returned, "is that the other members of your gild will never knowingly give you any increase of territory or power. You must look to your people for that."

HE GOT up and limped to a window, resting his weight largely on a cane, for he suffered greatly from gout. I looked at Masoya, but she refused to catch my eye. Her gaze was vacant, her face strained and white. Evidently she felt that we had reached the deciding point in the interview.

There at the window one old man was deciding whether or not there should be a war which would involve the changing of the map of Europe and the incidental death of thousands of men, not to speak of terrible suffering for millions of others. Suddenly he swung around, and for the first time he looked me squarely in the eye.

"I have decided to take your advice," he said bruskly. "Mr. Blair, I shall accept your very kind offer of a loan. I will give the word to the General Staff at once. Now that a decision has been reached, we had best move quickly."

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There was no look of sad responsibility on the Czar's face. As I live, he looked happier than he had since he entered.

"I don't think you have made a mistake, your Majesty," I said.

"I trust not," he answered.

He went over and whispered something to Masoya; then, with a light nod to me, left the room. Masoya drew a deep breath.

"Oh, what shall I say? What shall I say?" she murmured almost hysterically. "Oh, Mr. Blair, God only knows the suspense I have been through! But you did it beautifully; you handled him just right. It couldn't have been better. Come, let's spread the news."

We galloped out of the Palace gates, past the astonished sentries who had never seen such undignified conduct before, reined up a moment at the Military Club to whisper the news across the railing of the verandas, called it to Boris as we passed him on the corner, hailed some friends of Masoya's in a victoria, and finally wound up at the Kurtsky house, where the minister was even then in conference with the Czar over the telephone.

"You've done it, Dan!" exclaimed the minister, as I burst into his study. He covered the mouth of the receiver as he spoke. "The old fox takes it all for granted now. He can't get things started fast enough."

Before noon the tidings had spread through the city and were flashing by telegraph to the farthest corners of the little kingdom. Officers were mounting and riding in haste between the barracks and the War Office. Preliminary mobilization measures had already been put in force and the number of men under arms tremendously augmented. Now another levy was decreed.

The newspapers printed extras in a steady stream during the afternoon, telling of the scenes of rejoicing the news caused in Athens and Belgrade. Bygone enmity with Serb and Greek was forgotten. Word came that the old King of Montenegro, who had withstood sixty years of struggle against the Turk, had ordered a special "*Te Deum*" celebrated. From the Western capitals came stories of astonishment and surprise, mingled with wrath, in Government circles which had confidently predicted that the war-cloud in the Balkans would blow over like so many that had preceded it. St. Petersburg was reported to be wild with joy over the projected crusade of Russia's brother Slavs of the South. Only in Vienna was there a dubious official silence, a threatening thundercloud of silent resentment.

I WAS standing on the sidewalk the following morning, watching a long column of reservists tramping in from the near-by country districts, when I felt a light touch on my arm and turned around to behold the melting eyes of Hélène von Anhalt.

"My fair enemy again!" I exclaimed, and clapped my hand over my pocket. "Really, I have nothing worth the taking."

"You are in a discourteous mood today," she said coldly, and the smile which had lightened her face as I turned died out.

"Oh, no," I replied pleasantly. "Merely inclined to take precautions. Fate endowed me with a naturally trusting disposition which I have to check occasionally."

She studied me through narrowed eyes.

"You are like all men, aren't you?" she said finally. "If things come your way you are willing to gibe and be merry."

"On the contrary," I returned, "to do myself the justice I believe I deserve, I'm equally ready to make the best of defeat."

"You will probably have a chance to prove it," she retorted.

"Does this look like it?" I indicated the dense brown column of reservists.

"This?" she echoed contemptuously. "Do you think that because you have won first move you have won the game? Oh, I dare say your Bulgars will fight this war—and win it, perhaps, with your help.

"But do you think that will be the end? You are sadly mistaken, Mr. Blair." She smiled mockingly. "I am breaking no confidences, imparting no State secrets, when I tell you that Austria's arm is long and her policy tireless."

A small boy just behind us began to sing the "Sheumy Maritza," and the tune caught up by the enthusiastic crowd created a whirlpool of song and motion which tore us apart before I could answer.

"The Anhalt doesn't like to be beaten," I muttered to myself with a grin. And in half an hour I had forgotten the incident.

It had been well for me if I had engraved it on my memory in letters of fire. But that is looking into the future.

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CHAPTER XII

STOYAN AND I GO TO WAR

THE next few days were crammed with events—an indiscriminate blur of incidents too numerous and too swift in sequence for orderly survey. The stone we had set rolling sped on its way, gathering additional impetus with every revolution. The whole Balkans flamed with war. In Bulgaria, a nation of four and a half millions automatically readjusted itself so that it became a single, vast, coördinate machine for military purposes.

Out of the four and a half millions, four hundred thousand of the ablest, sturdiest men were summoned to the colors, and their places in shops, fields and factories were taken by their wives and children. The Army took over the railroads, the cab-horses and the farm-stock for transport service. The National Bank established special currency measures to prevent any tightening of the money-market. In a few hours the activities of the nation were turned from the manifold paths of peaceful commerce into the single path of war.

The pick of the nation's manhood were in the ranks; and those who remained behind, women as well as men, labored first for the army and second for themselves. Everything was subordinated to military necessity. Marriages, christenings and even funeral services were put off; for there were no priests. All who were strong enough to go had marched with the various regiments, the older men as chaplains, the younger shouldering guns in the ranks.

It made a man's blood pump faster in his veins to see such whole-souled patriotism on every hand. And across the frontier in Servia and in Montenegro and Greece the same spirit prevailed. The tiny Christian countries, so long cowed by Europe's selfish commands, at last cast aside all restraint and marched forth to prove that they who had once been Turkey's slaves were now her military superiors. The Panslavs of the world thrilled at the sight of three Slav nations, Bulgaria, Servia and Montenegro, marching shoulder to shoulder to battle for the first time.

But Austria glowered and threatened, held up trainloads of guns and ammunition for Servia, tried to prevent the return of reservists through her territory, enforced emergency-tariff restrictions to make harder the difficulties of war-time, addressed vaguely menacing notes to the various Balkan Ministries, and talked of "limitation of any possible territorial gains." We who knew simply chuckled. We knew that Austria saw behind this war the specter of a Balkan Confederation which would be Panslav in its sympathies, and that she dreaded the effect of such an achievement upon her millions of Slav subjects in Hungary and Bohemia, who for centuries had chafed under the Hapsburg yoke.

We often talked about this phase of the matter—the minister, Masoya and I—in the hurried conferences we held between the thousand and one engagements of those busy days. The minister was the big man of the hour—not the man whose name was flourished in all the newspapers, who conferred with foreign newspaper representatives, harangued the *Sobranje*, and was followed by cheering crowds, but the big man who sat calm and unknown behind the scenes, and pulled the wires and told the puppets in the limelight what they were to do and think.

It was he who suggested that I had best follow the Army in the field.

"This is going to be the quickest and most decisive campaign in all history, if our military men live up to their assertions—and I think they will," he said. "I'll have Savoff come over and you can talk with him. As Generalissimo, he will have the fullest powers and will conduct any negotiations. He is one of us, and you can trust him."

That was how I came to meet General Michael Savoff, the Bulgarian Napoleon, or rather von Moltke. A tall, broad-shouldered man, whose grizzled hair and beard were the only signs of his fifty-five years, he possessed a soldierly manner that inspired confidence in all who met him.

"You had best be with us from the time the invasion begins, Mr. Blair," he advised. "There will be only two battles, and I doubt if the whole campaign lasts two weeks."

"Is it really necessary for Mr. Blair to go with you, General?" asked Masoya. Like every one else he seemed to know her well—much better than I did.

"I should say yes," replied the General. "The principal value of Mr. Blair's assistance lies in our ability to spring it the moment we have completed our bargain with him. For that reason I should have

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him beside me, in order to be able to present him to the Turks without delay when we open negotiations with them."

"But would not a letter do just as well?" objected Masoya.

"Look here!" I interrupted. "With all due respect to every one present, I must observe that my opinion has not been asked. Personally, I prefer to see something of this campaign."

"I shall be glad to have you with me, Mr. Blair," said Savoff with a laugh. "It is for the minister to say, however."

"You had better go, by all means," answered the minister. "Eh, Masoya?"

But she did not answer him.

WAR was now a question of hours. On October 13th the Bulgarian, Greek and Servian Governments had presented a collective note to Turkey, demanding specific assurances of the performance of certain reforms in Macedonia. On October 15th Turkey patched up a hurried peace with Italy, thus bringing to a close the desultory hostilities between the two countries, and leaving the Sultan's Government free to meet the Balkan Allies alone. On October 17th came the Turkish reply to the note in the form of a declaration of war against Bulgaria and Servia. Hoping to the last to detach Greece from the Alliance, Turkey omitted her from the declaration; but Greece retaliated by declaring war herself on the same day.

On the afternoon of the 16th I went to say good-by to Masoya. I was to leave that evening by special train for headquarters in the walled-off area along the frontier known as the "Zone of Mobilization," and I had to admit to myself that I was going with mingled emotions in my heart. No Bulgarian believed more implicitly in his country's destiny or prayed harder for victory. But more and more I had come to realize in the past week that the destiny I believed in and the victory I prayed for would mean the annihilation of another hope that had been born in me since I had come to Sofia. They would mean the fulfilment of this strange girl's dream of a Balkan Empire, and her marriage to the heir to its throne.

As if by an irony of circumstance, as I turned into the street on which Masoya lived, on the outskirts of the diplomatic quarter, whom should I encounter but the Crown Prince Boris himself, coming out of her gate with his adjutant. He knew who I was, I dare say, for he bowed; but he must have been surprised if not displeased by the curt acknowledgment he got in return for it.

I reached Masoya's door with a face like a thundercloud, and black temper seething in my heart. Stoyan, uncoiled himself from a rug in the hall as I entered and came over to my side. I sat in a low chair before the fire and Stoyan stood beside me with his big head resting against my chest. But my thoughts were not pleasant, and I fancy they were written plainly across my face when Masoya came into the room.

"What is the matter?" she asked quickly, stopping short on the threshold with outstretched hand.

"Nothing," I answered moodily.

She crossed the room to my side and scanned my face more closely.

"You—— Tell me what is on your mind," she urged. "That is—— Have I a right to ask?"

The strain broke.

"Bless you, yes," I said. "But I can't tell you."

She sat down in another chair before the fire, and resting her chin in the palm of her hand stared into the flames.

"For that I am sorry," she said quaintly. "I would so like to support your troubles with you! But you are right. We can not tell our troubles always to others—even when the others are sympathetic. Can we?"

"No," I answered, and for a space there was a silence, broken only when Stoyan yawned until his jaws cracked.

"At first I thought that something terrible had happened to our plans," she went on. "Do you know, I am ashamed of myself at times because I do not seem to be able to think of people apart from our plans? I was thinking today that with you, at least, I have succeeded in divorcing my practical self from the part of me that is for my friends."

"I am glad," I said. "I like to think that I am something more to you than a fellow conspirator."

"You are," she replied, and we fell silent again.

"When we meet again things will be very different," she went on after a while. "I have a feeling that there will be changes." She hesitated. "The Crown Prince has just been here."

"I met him going away," I replied.

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"He is not a bad boy," she said bravely. "His father has told him he wishes us to become acquainted. He is very polite." She paused, evidently expecting me to help her out; but I refused. "Don't you—aren't you interested?" she asked timidly.

"Very interested—in everything that concerns you," I told her as gently as I could, trying to keep the quiver from my voice. "But—you know what I think of that plan. Yet I can not speak. Can't you see? It would not be right for me to speak. I can not agree with what I feel is humanly wrong, no matter what political justification there may be for it; but neither can I urge against your adoption of a course, while I feel that my opinions may be controlled by my personal interest."

Her eyes, wide and earnest, fairly clung to my face.

"You—you mean—all of that?" she faltered.

"All," I said grimly.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" she cried, with an almost hysterical little sob. "I'm so glad!" She reached over and caught my hand. "Don't think me selfish, Dan—" it was the first time she had used my first name, and it made me thrill—"I—I—it makes it easier for me—what I have to do."

"It doesn't make it any easier for me," I answered with gloomy egotism.

In a second she was beside my chair, her hand stroking my cheek, whispering low, meaningless, broken phrases in my ear. How I controlled myself I don't know. I was going to put my arms around her and draw her to me when suddenly she saw the danger that confronted us, and her brave eyes looked straight into mine.

"We must be strong," she said steadily. "We are not little people, you and I."

I drew a long breath of relief, for I knew the danger was past. And at the same time I was conscious of an inward feeling of exhilaration such as comes with escape from calamity. But there was no exhilaration in Masoya's face. Two great drops gathered in her unblinking eyes.

"Ah!" she cried. "It is so hard to make one's self a pawn! I thought I had succeeded in crushing out my individual tastes and preferences, and now——"

"Now you know that you are a mere woman," I finished for her.

"Yes," she said. "And yet, Dan, if we pay this price which seems to be demanded from us, surely we shall accomplish something worth while in return."

"That is as Fortune spins the wheel," I returned, and stood up to go. "Shall I say good-by?"

"No, no!" she insisted. "You must sit down again. I have much to tell you before you go." And she ran and put her hands on my shoulders and forced me back in my chair.

It seemed as if suddenly an oppressive something in the atmosphere had been removed, and we breathed more easily and looked upon each other without restraint.

FOR a time our talk hinged upon the secret plot which she and the Czar entertained of evolving from this war a rejuvenated Empire of the East, only Slav instead of Greek; a military confederacy, each State in which should be equal and autonomous, but over which Ferdinand was to be Emperor, with his imperial capital at Constantinople.

And this was but the beginning of their plans. With all European Turkey added to their territories, and control of that section of Europe south of the Danube and east of the Adriatic fast in their hands, they dreamed of cowing Roumania, of hacking Bosnia and Herzegovina, Dalmatia and Croatia, from Austria, and of gradually whittling away from the Hapsburg monarchy all the other segments of Slav territory in Hungary.

"It's a brave plan," I said finally, "but a mad scheme."

"Yet practical enough," she replied, "if Ferdinand will only stick to it."

"If," I answered.

"And that reminds me," she interjected. "Have you heard about Gortcheff?"

"No," I returned with a grin. "Is his arm bothering him?"

"It is a serious matter," she reproved me. "He has been appointed to the command of the thirty-fifth division, which is to be part of Dimitrieff's field army."

"Well, I'm glad he's going to get a chance to die like a gentleman even if he is a blackguard," I said. "But I don't see that it concerns me any."

"You are such a child!" Masoya gave me a look of utter despair. "With all your experience of this country, haven't you learned that a man of his stamp never forgets an enemy? He hates you. In the

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last few days he has been talking about you and making threats. Oh, I have been keeping track of him, if you have not! But that is not all. He has been meeting the Anhalt since the duel."

"What do you make out of that?"

"I don't know." She knitted her brows. "I have always suspected him. As I told you the other day, he seems in close touch with Vienna, yet I have never been able to prove anything against him. But within the last few days he has met the Anhalt twice, and von Griffenstein—— Did you know that von Griffenstein had been released? The Austrian minister made a formal complaint. At any rate von Griffenstein has disappeared, *via* the Bucharest Express."

"Which might mean either Constantinople or Vienna," I commented.

"Probably Constantinople," she said. "And von Griffenstein was present at the last interview between Gortcheff and the Anhalt, which makes it doubly significant."

"I should say so. Why don't you speak to the Czar?"

"It would never do. Ferdinand likes Gortcheff."

"Yet, even if he commands a division of twenty thousand men, I don't see how he can do any harm," I objected.

"I don't know how he could harm you," she admitted simply. "But I want you to take every precaution. Your life is very valuable to Bulgaria—and to me."

"I will be careful," I promised.

"Oh, I hope so. But it will be very dangerous out there with the Army. I know you will not stay with the Staff. You are too headstrong."

"But I always get out of scrapes," I argued, feeling like a schoolboy.

"Even so I think I shall send a guardian with you," she returned. "Stoyan!"

The hound rose from his haunches and looked up into her face with great, luminous brown eyes, piercingly intelligent.

"Go with Dan," she commanded softly.

The dog regarded her a moment longer, then turned and crossed the room to my side and stood awaiting orders.

"Does he understand you?" I asked.

"He will go wherever you go," she answered. "And nobody could persuade him to leave you, except yourself or me. He will stand by you in anything, and if you should ever be in trouble and wish to send for help he would carry a message to me." She fumbled in the breast of her frock and drew out a tiny handkerchief such as women carry. "If you should send me a message by him, wrap it up in this. He knows that it is mine by the smell, and nothing could prevent him from carrying it to me."

That night Stoyan and I left for the frontier, and twenty-four hours later we stood in a little village on the Bulgarian side of the boundary, listening to the tearing crackle of infantry-fire as a cloud of Bulgarian skirmishers pushed back the Turkish outposts in preparation for a real advance the next day.

TO BE CONCLUDED

Editorial Note:—*The European war, like many another crisis in the past, arose in the Balkans. It is this potentiality for history-making that makes them such excellent material for fiction. In "The Sinews of War" the time is set during the war with Turkey and the ensuing war among the allies, with the rest of Europe hovering uneasily on the edge of the combat. The general color may be relied upon, for the author knows the Balkans at first-hand. For the rest, it is fiction pure and simple. Several historical people appear in the tale, but their portraiture is in accordance with the needs of fiction, not with their actual characteristics. Most of the characters are entirely fictional, though some of them have been put into high places. But the spirit of reality is there—the spirit of the Balkans. And the Balkans, for half a century, have been one of the Great Keys to the world's history.*

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Come-On Charley and the Red Sea Fleas

by

Thomas Addison

MR. TEETERS took the letter from the bell-boy, closed the door, and wheeled around to Mr. Carter. His pale eyes were wide with conjecture.

"It's a special delivery for you, Come-On," he stated, and walked slowly over to him.

Mr. Carter was lounging in an easy-chair by the window of his sitting-room in the Hotel Rirebien. Mr. Joseph Link, ex-middleweight champion of the squared circle, was seated facing him. The two were engaged in an animated discussion of the points of a débutant they had seen in a six-round bout the night before at the Universal Sporting Club. But at his secretary's announcement, Mr. Carter looked up. Telegrams and special deliveries have a way of claiming one's attention.

"Gee!" he exclaimed. "Somebody's in a hurry."

"They want the money quick," observed Mr. Link sardonically.

"Who is it from, Skeeters?" asked Mr. Carter.

The secretary, who to his intimates answered indifferently to the name of Percival Teeters, which was his own, or Merciful Skeeters, which Broadway humor had conferred on him, squinted at the return card on the envelope and read it out—

"Jonas Hogg, Hotel Española, West Thirty-second Street!"

At this Mr. Link, who was Irish, grunted in derision and remarked:

"Faith, there's an English pig in the wrong sty. Do you know the animal, Charley?"

"You can search me," invited Mr. Carter. "What does he want, Percy? Read it."

Mr. Teeters sat down and opened the letter. Reading Mr. Carter's mail to him

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was the chief and most onerous of his duties as private secretary to that easy-going gentleman; for ninety-nine per cent. of the letters being of the "touch" variety, they were never noticed. This, then, and drawing his weekly salary on the hair-line of maturity, were the only serious inroads on his time and patience which Mr. Teeters' post involved; and he bore up under these cares with admirable fortitude.

"Ha!" he sniggered as he spread out Mr. Hogg's epistle on his knee. "Ha! See who's here! Little 'Liza Ann has took her pen in hand."

"What! Who is she?" demanded Charley.

"I'm only kidding," replied Mr. Teeters, cackling noisily. "Don't know her name, but a woman wrote this or I'll eat the ink off it for my lunch. Yeh, I knew it! It's signed 'Jonas Hogg, per L. A.' That stands for 'Liza Ann, don't it?"

"What's the printing pinned at the top?" questioned Mr. Link. "Looks like it's cut from a newspaper."

"Read the letter first, Percy. Get busy!" commanded Mr. Carter crisply.

The secretary knew the tone, and he did not delay in getting busy. Once upon a time he had disregarded the warning signal—to his great physical discomfit. Mr. Carter had simply picked him up by the elbows and set him down again, but his teeth had rattled in his head for an hour afterward. So Mr. Teeters began hurriedly:

"My Dear Sir: I am alone in a strange city, and confined to my room with valvular heart-trouble. Hardship in the Far East brought it on, and worry has accelerated the progress of the disease. Right here let me say it is not financial worry that afflicts me, for I have with me in this room, in hand-reach, the equivalent of one hundred thousand dollars. It is the care of this property which is causing me sleepless nights and is aggravating my disease."

Mr. Teeters raised his eyes from the written page and wiggled his mustache.

"If I had a hundred thousand," he declaimed to the gilded electrolier overhead, "it would aggravate me so that I'd laugh myself to death."

"Go on!" Mr. Carter bade him tersely, and he did so on the instant.

"In my extremity I have decided to turn to you for assistance. I do this because I believe you and your astute associate, Mr. Percival Teeters, to be honest, reliable and resourceful men. I have read about you in the papers, and the way you handled that gang of swindlers in the Titian fake—the 'Lady of the Loggia' picture—convinces me that my fleas could be safely entrusted to your keeping."

"His *what?*" queried Mr. Link, putting his hand to his right ear as if in doubt of that particular organ's accuracy.

Mr. Teeters went back and read the word again.

"His fleas—f-l-e-a-s."

"Sure," said Charley, grinning. "Hogs have 'em."

"Saints in heaven, so they do!" assented the ex-champion. "And so do monkeys."

"Go on, Skeeters," enjoined Charley. "Wants to give us fleas. What for?"

Mr. Teeters reached down and scratched a purely imaginary bite on his scraggy shank as he went on:

"These fleas constitute the property alluded to. I have, in short, a fortune in fleas. I will not attempt particulars in the brief confines of a letter, but will direct your attention to the attached clipping from the *Evening Scream* of recent date. From this you will see that fleas of a certain variety have a value little suspected by the general public; in addition, it will serve to assure you that I am not of unsound mind, as otherwise you might infer."

Mr. Link interjected a skeptical grunt here, but Mr. Teeters continued evenly:

"To sum the matter up in a word, I am in danger of losing my fleas. In a few days that danger will have passed. If you will come to me on receipt of this and take charge of my fleas for the period mentioned, I will compensate you liberally, and you will be doing a kindness to one who is hovering on the brink of the grave."

"Oh, I say, Joe!" exclaimed Charley. "Poor chap! In bad. What?"

Mr. Link's compassion, however, was not so easily evoked.

"Read the newspaper-clipping, Merciful, me lad," he requested Mr. Teeters.

"Wait—here's a tag at the bottom of the letter," spoke up the secretary.

"I am his nurse. If you come, please be careful and do nothing to excite him. It might prove fatal. L. A."

"You see?" said Charley to Mr. Link.

"Give us the *Scream* stuff," insisted the fighting man obdurately.

MR. TEETERS complied, and any one who will take the trouble to refer to the files of the *Evening Scream* for the current year will find the news item precisely as it is here set forth:

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$5000 FOR A FLEA*

Chicago, Oct. 2—George Porkington, the eminent packer, is said today, on the authority of Alfred Bonwit of the Chicago Academy of Natural Science, to have paid $5000 for a specimen of a rare variety of flea—one of the kind which is occasionally found in the skin of the sea-otter. The flea will be added to Mr. Porkington's famous entomological collection.

"Gollamighty!" squealed Mr. Teeters, throwing aside the letter. "I had a water-spaniel once that was so full of fleas it made him bow-legged toting 'em around. If he'd only been a sea-otter I'd be worth now——"

"Come down before you fall!" Mr. Link admonished the soaring secretary.

Then he turned to Mr. Carter.

"What do you think of it?" he asked.

"Don't know," said Charley. "What do you think?"

"Well," returned the pugilist with ponderous deliberation, "I've not had much of an opinion of fleas up to now; but if you can show me one that's worth five thousand jingles, I'll let it choose its own place to eat me, and I'll take off my hat while it's doing it."

"Same here!" declared Mr. Teeters. "And I want to see a hundred thousand dollars' worth of fleas before I die."

He wriggled in his chair and scratched another imaginary bite.

"Hopping Henry!" he exclaimed. "It ain't surprising this guy has got the fidgets. It makes me nervous just to talk about it!"

Charley looked thoughtful.

"Sounds straight," he said. "Only—there's the woman."

"What of it?" inquired Mr. Link, unable to discover the connection.

"Nothing, maybe. Perhaps a lot," rejoined Mr. Carter enigmatically.

"I know what he's driving at, Joe," put in Mr. Teeters. "Every con-game we been up against had a girl out in front barking for the show; and some of them were peaches, believe your little boy. But this skirt——"

He paused and wiggled his mustache with a sapient air.

"Well?" The middleweight was humorously urgent. "Spit it out, Mr. Johnny Wise."

"Why," argued the secretary, "she's a trained nurse! Get that? And a church steeple is as crooked as a pig's tail alongside those blue-gingham sisters. They'd make a ramrod look like a string of Z's."

"Is that so?" Mr. Link laid a stress on the pronoun which was intended to carry a doubt of so sweeping an assertion.

"Yes, that's so!" affirmed Mr. Teeters belligerently. "And besides—there's the fleas!"

Charley bestowed a quizzical glance on the master of the gloves.

"Sure, Joe. There's the fleas."

"Bet your life!" cried Mr. Teeters in triumph. "Who ever heard of anybody pulling off a con-game with a flock of fleas? It can't be done! You got to have something you put your finger on."

"And the flea ain't there," commented Mr. Link without a smile.

"Let's go see this Itchy-Ike, Come-On," implored Mr. Teeters. "He's a dying man, he says—on the way to Croakville. We ought to help him check his trunk."

"By George!" said Charley. "Guess you're right. Call the car."

Mr. Teeters crossed to the telephone and called up the garage. The livery yellow touring-car in which he had burst upon the astonished eyes of Broadway a few weeks back was now a thing to jest about—a memory only. For Mr. Carter had become the owner of a big "sixty" whose hue would pale a ripe tomato into dim obscurity.

This color-scheme was Mr. Teeters' choice. Mr. Carter cared not a thrip whether his machine were painted red, white or blue—or all three—so that it developed speed; and Mr. Teeters' taste, as we know, ran to violent effects.

While the secretary was ordering out this blazing vehicle, Mr. Link, who did not believe in going around Robinson's barn to gather information when he could jump the fence and land on it, put a question point-blank to Mr. Carter.

"Charley, me boy, how much have you cleaned up, in round numbers, from these New York Sly Sammies—the lads with the come-on candy?"

"A hundred and forty-eight thousand," Charley told him.

Mr. Link flapped the air with his huge paws.

"Go off!" he hooted. "Ye're joking me!"

"Luck," said Charley. "That's all."

The man of muscle looked at him with an odd expression on his broad face. He was proud of his pet pupil's "science" with

*Author's Note—In sober truth, this price was paid in January last by Alfred Charles de Rothschild, of London, for a flea from the sea-otter, and the cable carried the news.

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the gloves, and here was another cause for pride.

"Lord love us!" he ejaculated. "And he calls it luck!"

"They handed it to me. Couldn't dodge it," insisted Charley.

"Of course," retorted Mr. Link with fine sarcasm. "It's a way them buncos have with 'em, as everybody knows. You can read about it in the papers any day—how the suckers come to town and go home rich because the con-men come across so easy. Ain't you satisfied, Charley, with the two million your uncle willed you, without robbing the poor and needy?"

A slow smile stirred Charley's lips. A millionaire by a widespread reputation, he had yet to touch the money; and one Samuel Drew, Esq., attorney-at-law, well knew the reason for it. The attentive reader of these simple chronicles knows it also. If Charley guessed it he kept it to himself. He gave no sign of disquiet or impatience. Drew had handed him ten thousand dollars and told him he must make it grow; it was to prove, so the lawyer said, that he could be entrusted with the principal.

And this "starter" had grown, whether by sheer luck, as Charley claimed, or by reason of other forces, the reader must determine for himself. The boy's smile quickened as he answered his pugilist friend.

"I'm satisfied," he declared. "But nothing like a little extra change. Grease keeps the wheels going 'round. Running expenses."

Mr. Link wagged his head regretfully.

"Then it's small lashings of it ye'll be getting this day, me son. It looks like straight goods they're handling. Bad 'cess to it, I say, for I'd love to see you add another honest penny to what you have. But a crook can't afford to spring a funny turn like this. A Hogg with heart-disease is going some, but when he can't sleep o' nights because—— Oh, faith, it would make a goat giggle! It's got to be the real thing this time, Charley, boy."

"Sure," said Charley.

"It'll be right around, Come-On," called out Mr. Teeters from across the room.

He turned away from the telephone and remarked:

"Merry Moses, but the guy at that gas-tank is a fresh chunk of beef! He says they have to use smoked glasses when they clean our car. I told him——"

But Mr. Teeters' retort, however pertinent or impertinent it may have been, can only be conjectured. A knock at the door interrupted him, and he swung about and opened it.

A STOUT man stood in the doorway bowing apologetically. His eyes, which were a glittering black, passed from one to another of the occupants of the room in swift survey. He might have been any age from forty to fifty. His face was smooth and well featured, and his clothes could have been worn by a banker with credit to himself and his tailor.

"I beg pardon," said this gentleman pleasantly. "My name is Herbert Nuckels."

He advanced a little way from the door and asked—

"Which is Mr. Charles Carter, please?"

"That's him," proclaimed Mr. Teeters, leveling a bony finger at his chief. "I'm his secretary. My name is Teeters."

"Oh! Ah!" replied the stranger.

He advanced a little farther into the room and looked inquiringly at the prize-fighter. Charley made the introduction.

"Mr. Link," said he, with a wave of the hand. "Have a chair."

Mr. Nuckels came still farther forward and helped himself to a seat. His eyes lingered for a bare instant on the letter which Mr. Teeters had thrown on the center-table.

"I took the liberty of coming up unannounced," he apprised Mr. Carter, "because I was afraid that otherwise you might refuse to see me."

Mr. Teeters looked at Charley and then at Mr. Link. Both were stolidly regarding the visitor. Whereupon Mr. Teeters spoke.

"This is Monday," he hinted delicately. "Wednesday is touch day—from four to five A. M."

Mr. Nuckels met this with an easy laugh.

"Thank you; I'll make a note of it, though I'm not an early riser. My errand today, it happens, is of a different nature. It has to do with a letter—a special delivery, from Mr. Jonas Hogg."

Charley and Mr. Link involuntarily glanced at the letter. Mr. Teeters was staring open-mouthed at the speaker.

"Oh, you have received it, I see," went on Mr. Nuckels blandly. "I thought I had allowed it time enough to get to you."

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"I say," said Charley, "talk turkey. Busy."

"I'll detain you only a moment," Mr. Nuckels assured him. "Hogg wrote to you about the fleas, of course. I chanced to be in the Española's office when he sent the letter down, and saw the address. That's how I'm here. I would like to know what Hogg's proposition is."

"Nerve!" was Mr. Carter's simple comment on this cool request.

At this Mr. Link broke his silence. He leaned forward and addressed Mr. Nuckels with a consideration quite foreign to his usual manner.

"Maybe you won't mind telling us, Colonel, where you come in on this flea layout? You'll allow it's only a fair question, seeing as we haven't met you much before today. Is Hogg a friend of yours?"

"Friend?" Mr. Nuckels expelled the word from his interior with bitter sarcasm. "Friend? He's a traitor, sir! He's trying to do me out of my interest in those fleas!"

"By George!" said Charley.

Mr. Teeters shut his mouth, then opened it to give passage to his emotions, which were a mixture of surprise and disgust.

"Huh!" he exclaimed. "I got another guess coming to me. I thought this geezer Hogg was on the level."

"Take the count!" growled Mr. Link at the secretary. "Let the gentleman tell his story."

Mr. Nuckels made a deprecating movement with his hand.

"Oh, he's not a crook, Hogg isn't," he demurred. "I spoke too hastily, perhaps. He'll play straight enough with you. But he's cutting up with me. I staked him to his trip to Suez and down the Red Sea, where he got the fleas. Cost me five thousand dollars; and now he claims I'm only due a third interest. He says he's ruined his health, and shortened his life, and is entitled to more than me."

"Isn't he?" asked Charley.

"A bargain's a bargain," rejoined Mr. Nuckels.

"Got any papers to show?" demanded Charley.

"Unfortunately, no. It's my word against his."

"Ha!" interposed Mr. Teeters. "We ain't seen him yet."

Mr. Carter ignored this interruption.

"The fleas. What about them? All right?" he inquired of Mr. Nuckels.

"The fleas?" Mr. Nuckels' voice took on a note of fervor. "They are wonderful! The rarest specimens in the world. Nothing like them in any of the collections. Why, sir, they are priceless!"

Charley got up, and stepping to the table took from it Mr. Hogg's letter. He ran his eye over it. Mr. Link and Mr. Teeters watched him closely. He was acting curiously, it seemed to them.

"Hogg says he's got lung-trouble. Hemorrhages," Charley mentioned casually.

"What? He says that?" Mr. Nuckels' surprise was manifest.

Mr. Link's lips twitched slightly, but Mr. Teeters' mobile countenance was plastered over with astonishment. The stranger's glittering eyes flashed from him to Charley.

"Why," he scoffed, "Hogg must be crazy to tell you that! His lungs are good as mine. He has heart-disease—valvular enlargement. And that's the mischief of it; his nurse won't let me talk with him. She says any violent emotion will kill him. I'm up a stump. Can't move one way or the other, and I want your help."

Charley held out his hand.

"Shake!" he said. "You're straight. Here's Hogg's proposition."

He offered Mr. Nuckels the letter and grinned at Mr. Link, who chuckled his appreciation of the bit of strategy.

"By gum!" cried Mr. Teeters. "Thought he was conning you, Come-On, hey?" He cackled knowingly. "You ought to be able to spot a gull-guggle by this time. I can tell 'em in a fog so thick you got to take a hatchet to cut a hole in it."

Charley winked at Mr. Link.

"Sure," he said. "You're a wonder, Teet."

"A mule, you mean," grunted the boxer, who was not passionately attached to the narrow-chested secretary. "Look at his ears!"

Mr. Nuckels, apparently, was one of those gifted beings who can sense a letter in a *coup d'œil*, as they say in France and sometimes here, when one wishes to tack a frill to the plain garment of his native speech. The airy persiflage that played about him no sooner ceased than he rose from his chair and handed Mr. Hogg's communication back to Charley.

"It is as I thought," he observed. "Jonas

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has the idea that I'm trying to get his fleas away from him. He's wrong. I only want a square deal."

"Fair," said Charley.

"Are you going to see him?" questioned Mr. Nuckels.

"Sure," said Charley. "Right away."

"Are you going to keep the fleas for him?"

"Can't say," answered Charley. "Depends."

Mr. Nuckels frowned to himself. Then he said, speaking earnestly:

"Jonas is dickering with somebody, but I can't find out who. He'll want the fleas back when he's ready to close the deal. Let me know when that is and I'll make it worth your while—something handsome, sir. What do you say?"

Charley pondered this for a moment.

"Come around tomorrow," he replied. "Same time. Talk it over."

He turned abruptly and walked into the next room. Mr. Nuckels seemed somewhat taken aback at this unceremonious dismissal. He coughed and looked at Mr. Teeters. That individual was staring blankly after Charley. Mr. Nuckels looked at Mr. Link and raised his brows.

"Trifle queer, isn't he?" he intimated.

In answer, the prize-fighter, his countenance quite unmoved, tapped his bullet head with his middle finger—three times, and with deliberation.

"Oh, I see," said Mr. Nuckels. And he went out carrying himself with the mien of a man who is faring well, as far as he can spy out the road before him. When he reached the street he hurried to a telegraph-office and sent off a message. Then he lighted a cigar and strolled leisurely down Broadway.

II

CHARLEY and Mr. Teeters found their top-coats comfortable as they bowled southward from the Rirebien. Mr. Carter's coat was a plain black, as became that gentleman's sober tastes, but Mr. Teeters' was an écru cheviot, and it gave him the appearance of a bilious ghost joy-riding in a chariot of fire. He buttoned himself up a little closer as they purred along—screening reluctantly the glories of the plaids beneath—for he was long and lank, was Mr. Teeters, and shy of meat upon his bones.

The tang of Autumn was in the air; and if you were fond of the country, and your imagination riotously rampant, you could almost smell the reek of burning brush in garden-plots, and hear the rustle of the corn-blades tented with their stalks in the hazy reaches of the bottom-lands.

But Mr. Teeters was from a New Jersey town where only mud and mosquitoes grew, and his imagination ended with his nose—it went no farther. And so, instead of picturing to himself the dreamy delights of Autumn countrysides, he said to Mr. Carter:

"We got to be careful, Come-On, how we spill the chatter with this gink we're going to see. We got to remember he's running a bum pump under his slats. The nurse says it'll croak him if we get his goat."

"Wish Joe was along," remarked Charley. "Long head."

"Huh!" sniffed Mr. Teeters, but refrained from further comment.

Mr. Link had declined to come with them, arguing that it would be crowding the mourners to obtrude himself uninvited at the bedside of a dying man; he would get the news of the visit later. This suited Mr. Teeters outright, for the pugilist had a way of taking the center of the stage in conversation that irked the secretary, who loved the limelight and hugged it as the bark hugs the tree.

When the car drew up before the Hotel Española Mr. Teeters uttered an expression of disgust.

"What sort of a coop is this?" he jeered. "Looks like they'd towed it down from Tarrytown and went off and forgot it!"

It was, in truth, a mere box of brick stood up on end and wedged into line with a row of similar boxes that made the block. Somebody worth while may have lived in it in the days when Thirty-second Street was verging on the suburbs, but now it harbored flotsam from overseas.

The paint was peeling from the bricks, and the half dozen sandstone steps leading to the upper door were flaked and scaled away in spots until the water lay in shallow pools on them when it rained. The basement had been torn out and made over into a restaurant level with the street. "Table d'hôte, forty cents," was the Circean call to the passer-by, and the brave who entered deserved the fare.

Charley and Mr. Teeters went up the sandstone steps and into the office of this dubious house of entertainment. A very

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fat woman with a sallow skin, oily black hair, and much powder on her nose, hoisted herself from a rocking-chair and waddled forward to meet them. She had seen the car roll up and her Latin soul rejoiced in its flaming splendor. An odor of garlic floated about this lady like an incense gone to the bad—you could have told her in the dark anywhere. She said to them——

But right here this historian will depart from the established usage of certain authors in good and regular standing—perhaps because he himself has not attained that enviable status. He is not going to turn loose on the patient reader a single word of Spanish, although he has a neat little phrase-book at his elbow. The lady said, in perfectly understandable English:

"Good afternoon, gentlemen. Is there one 'ere you would wish to see?"

"Jonas Hogg," replied Charley. "Got a letter from him. Asked us to call."

The worthy matron gave her head a succession of short nods which set her pendulous cheeks a-quiver.

"Ah, yes! Mr. 'Ogg! The nurse 'ave tell me he is attending you. Mr. Carter, is it not?"

"Yes," said Charley briefly.

"Come with me, if you please," the other begged him, and lumbered out into the hall.

At the foot of a flight of stairs she paused, breathing stertorously, and pointed a sausage-like finger up them.

"The front room, Number Four," she panted.

And with a vast smile and another discharge of rapid-fire nods, she left them and lumbered back to her lair.

"Say, Come-On," whispered Mr. Teeters, as they climbed the stairs. "That dame ought to hang a red lantern on herself when she goes out nights, to show the street is blocked."

"Stow it!" Charley ordered. "Not her fault. Ought to hang a bell on you. Help to find your shadow."

Thus properly rebuked, Mr. Teeters trailed in silence after his chief to Number Four. Mr. Carter tapped on the door. It was opened by a girl in cap and apron—a comely young person who stepped out into the passage and pulled the door to behind her. She scanned them critically a moment before giving them welcome.

"Mr. Carter; Mr. Teeters?" she then inquired.

Charley smiled at her. A pretty woman always stirred him.

"Yes," he answered. "Came as quick as we could."

The girl smiled back at him.

"I saw the machine and thought it might be you. I am Miss Amory. Please be careful not to excite my patient."

She turned the knob and preceded them into the room. It matched the general appearance of the house, which is all that need be said of it.

"The gentlemen you were expecting, Mr. Hogg," the nurse announced in the guarded tones of the sick-chamber.

THE invalid was reclining in a steamer-chair over which a rug had been thrown. A table stood near, and on it was a box of Flemish oak which looked like a humidor for 50's and, in fact, was one.

"Good! Good!" Mr. Hogg cried out in a husky voice. "I'm glad you came. I'm in a devil of a fix, as you can see."

To prove it, he motioned to Miss Amory, who helped him up from his chair as if he were a basket of eggs in imminent danger of breaking. He was a short, squat man, with a deep chest, and long arms with hairy hands that hung down like an ape's. If it were not for his bad heart he would be an ugly customer, Charley thought, in a rough and tumble fight.

"Got to be mighty careful," Mr. Hogg informed them. "And I'm an active man—or have been."

All this time he had been sizing up the young men with a pair of little, yellowish eyes. Now he held out his hand to Charley.

"Mr. Carter, I take it?"

"Yes," said Charley. "This is Mr. Teeters."

Mr. Hogg shook hands with the secretary.

"Know you both by reputation," he remarked. "Everybody does. Be seated. Miss Amory! The digitalis! She's skipping again!"

He put his palm to his chest and rolled his eyes. The nurse ran to the bureau and dropped something from a bottle into a medicine-glass.

"I say!" exclaimed Charley. "Sit down, sir! Don't make company of us. Friends!"

Miss Amory held the glass to the sufferer's lips and he swallowed the dose. It

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seemed to have a miraculous effect, for almost instantly he brightened up.

"Gollamighty!" breathed Mr. Teeters to himself. "I thought he was going to cash in!"

"Be seated, be seated," Mr. Hogg urged his callers. "Don't mind me. They come and go, these attacks. I'm all right now."

Charley looked around, and spying a chair at the table sat down on it. There was a waste-basket under the table, and he pushed it a little with his feet to get it out of the way. Mr. Teeters deposited himself on a sofa by the wall. He kept his eyes glued on Mr. Hogg with a sort of horrible fascination. He counted him as good as dead, and would not have been surprised had an undertaker walked in to take his measure.

"Here are the fleas," said Mr. Hogg, tapping the oaken box on the table. "In this humidor. Miss Amory, a straight chair, please."

The nurse fetched one from a corner, and he was about to seat himself when some one knocked on the door.

"See who it is," he commanded.

The girl opened the door and disclosed a boy with a telegram.

"Ah!" ejaculated Mr. Hogg. "Perhaps it's from Porkington's man in Chicago. Bring it to me. Quick!"

He glanced at the dispatch and smiled broadly.

"I've sold 'em!" he exulted.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" murmured Miss Amory. "It is better for you than medicine." She dropped on the sofa by Mr. Teeters.

"Listen!" requested Mr. Hogg of Charley:

"Will be with you Thursday at nine-thirty, Mr. Porkington authorizes purchase of all the fleas at your price—one hundred and ten thousand dollars.
"STEPHEN LAWLER."

"By George!" said Charley. "Want to see those fleas."

"The ten thousand is for you, sir," Mr. Hogg told him. "I had it in view when I made the deal—to pay some one well. Wait! I'll come to that," he added, seeing Charley's amazement.

He sat down and drew the box to him. Charley edged closer to the table. His feet encountered the basket again, and he pushed it gently until it stood half clear of the table, on the side away from the sofa.

"You see the wreck I am?" continued Mr. Hogg. "Chasing these fleas did it. But have a look at them before I go on."

He turned the key in the box and lifted the lid. A wire-gauze screen in a wooden framework was fitted into the box like a tray. Underneath was a lining of clean, white blotting-paper, and crawling around on the bottom were the fleas.

Charley gave a cry.

"Why—I say—they're *blue!*"

Mr. Teeters sprang up from the sofa and came over to them. His mustache wiggled and his pale eyes goggled as he peered at the insects. One of them jumped.

"Leaping Lazarus!" squeaked the secretary. "If a dog had 'em he'd lose his mind!"

Another flea jumped, and then another.

"Lively as crickets!" said Mr. Hogg proudly. "Twenty of 'em. Fifty-five hundred apiece. Some fleas, eh? And I brought them all the way from Suakin! A bit of raw beef and plenty of moisture is all they need—salt water. Caught 'em in the Red Sea."

"Ha!" croaked Mr. Teeters. "Why ain't they red, then?"

Mr. Hogg indulged in a husky laugh.

"Because they're blue," he returned.

Mr. Teeters went back to the sofa and sat down by Miss Amory. He scratched himself first on one arm, then on the other, and wriggled in his coat.

"It makes me feel that way, too, when I look at them," the girl confided to him in a whisper.

"Funny," said Charley to Mr. Hogg. "Never heard of a blue flea before." He was intently watching the little animals.

"Of course you haven't," rejoined the invalid. "And no one else till I caught 'em—except a sailor who found one on a dugong and told me about it. He's dead now—the sailor chap."

"Doo-gong?" put in Mr. Teeters from the sofa. "What's that? Anything like a dinner-gong?"

"A dugong," explained Mr. Hogg patiently, "is a sea-cow. They live in the Red Sea and come up on the shore to eat the grass. They——"

"Do they give milk?" interrupted Mr. Teeters, honestly eager for information.

Charley winked at Mr. Hogg and answered for him.

"Sure," he said. "Condensed milk. Feed babies on it."

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Mr. Teeters perceived the pleasantry and cackled; but Mr. Hogg, it seemed, was not in playful mood. He frowned and went on:

"They have a bunch of hair under the flippers, and there's where you find the fleas—if you're lucky. They're mighty scarce. I had to kill a hundred and seventy-three cows to get the fleas in that box. And it pretty near killed me. Ow! She's skipping again, Miss Amory. The digitalis!"

WHILE the nurse was giving succor, Charley let his eyes stray about the room. At length they idly rested on the waste-basket at his side. And then, as he looked, an odd light crept into them. Presently he took his handkerchief from his pocket. It slipped through his fingers and fell to the floor, and he bent down from his chair to recover it. When he had accomplished this the handkerchief was wadded up in his hand into a ball. He dabbed his forehead with it—for the room was warm—and returned it to his pocket.

Mr. Teeters, to whom the basket was in plain view from the sofa, did not note this incident. His eyes were again fixed on Mr. Hogg with fearful interest; and he sighed with relief when the gentleman rallied handsomely from his seizure.

"It'll get me yet," allowed Mr. Hogg with an air of resignation. "But I've made my name! Hogg's Fleas will wake 'em up when my deal with Porkington is known. He's buying them all to keep them out of other collections. See the point?"

Charley grinned at him, meanwhile working the basket back under the table, very softly and very slowly, with his feet.

"Sure," he responded. "Cornered the flea-market." He pulled out his watch and glanced at the time. "Gee! Half past one! Got to leave. Engagement."

"Hold on!" cried Mr. Hogg. "Ain't you going to take care of my fleas for me? I was coming to that."

"Oh!" said Charley. "Thought you'd forgotten it. Go ahead."

There was a subtle change in his attitude toward the afflicted man.

"It's like this," pursued Mr. Hogg. "A chap named Nuckels is trying to rob me of my fleas. He's made two attempts, and he'll try again. It's a business trouble between us, and he'd do me if I'd let him. I came to this confounded dog-kennel to hide from him, but he tracked me. He's got me worked up to such a pitch, blast him, that I can't sleep! I—I——"

"Mr. Hogg!" warned the nurse.

He swallowed once or twice and put his hand to his heart.

"Began to skip, but it stopped," he vouchsafed, and went on more calmly. "To get down to business, I want you to keep my fleas for me, Mr. Carter. And I don't want any one to see them—not a soul. Put them in the safe at your hotel; and on Thursday, at nine-thirty, bring them to me. Will you do it?"

Charley hesitated. He appeared to be considering the matter.

"Don't like the job," he said at last. "Big responsibility."

"But I'll pay you like a prince! Ten thousand dollars! By heavens, sir, you can't turn it down!"

Charley took this under consideration also. Mr. Hogg looked at him anxiously.

"Cash? Bank-notes?" asked Charley.

"On the nail, when you return the fleas."

Charley's features relaxed—broke into a grin.

"Go you!" he said. "Can't stand the pressure."

Mr. Hogg took the moistening-pad from the lid of the humidor.

"Miss Amory!" he called. "Wet it in that sea-water on the wash-stand. Soak it! And bring me the plate of beef."

These instructions being complied with promptly, Mr. Hogg inserted a small piece of the beef under the tray, placed the dripping pad back in the lid, locked the box, and put the key in his pocket.

"They'll do all right now until Thursday," he asserted. "Put the box in the safe, and don't tell them what's in it. Remember, there's a fortune in those fleas. I've got to trust somebody, and I've chosen you, sir. I believe you're honest."

"Thanks," said Charley.

He stood up, put the box under his arm, and added:

"Nine-thirty, Thursday. Watch your heart. Bad shape. Come along, Teet."

Mr. Hogg did not rise. He was leaning back in his chair, exhausted. The nurse escorted them to the door.

"For goodness' sake don't let anything happen to the fleas," she admonished Mr. Carter in a low aside. "It would kill him!"

"Miss Amory!" Mr. Hogg's voice came

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to them, weak and suffering. "The digitalis! She's skipping again!"

The girl hastily closed the door on the departing guests.

"Say, Come-On," questioned Mr. Teeters, halting half way down the stairs, "what the dickens is that 'digit-ally' stuff the chicken's feeding him?"

"Dream-water," said Charley soberly.

Mr. Teeters cackled at this good joke, and they went on to the street.

III

"BLUE fleas?" Mr. Link's tone was judicial. "I don't see why not. Because you never heard of them before, Charley, is nothing against the argyment. You never heard of anybody having an appendix till the surgeons found a new way of getting rich."

It was the day after Charley's visit to Mr. Hogg, and the ex-champion had dropped around to learn the news.

"That's what I say!" chimed in Mr. Teeters. "There's blackbirds and bluebirds, and blackfish and bluefish. What's the matter with black fleas and blue fleas?"

Mr. Link bestowed a grudging glance of approval on the secretary.

"A knockout for you, me laddy-buck. You think of fleas as black, Charley, don't you?"

"Sure," said Charley.

"And you think of grass as green?"

Charley nodded.

"And yet—" Mr. Link's voice rose triumphant—"they brag about the blue grass in Kentucky!"

Charley, who had been gravely contemplating Mr. Link, looked away.

"You'd call it straight, then?" he queried.

"Well," contended Mr. Link, still preserving his judicial air, "I can't see where it's crooked. They're not trying to sell you the fleas, and they're going to pay you for keeping them. Whether they're blue, black or green don't cut any figure. Faith, I can't see a hole to slip through anywhere unless—aha!—unless you lose the little devils!"

"In the safe. Downstairs," said Charley. "Box tight as drum. No holes."

"You saw them in the box when you locked it?" interrogated the pugilist.

"Merry Moses!" broke in Mr. Teeters impatiently. "What's eating you, Joe? Do you think he could pick them fleas out with his fingers? He'd have to use fly-paper to do the trick—and we sitting right there lamping him. Come again!"

Mr. Link grunted. For once he was without a rejoinder. Happily the telephone rang and saved his face. Mr. Teeters answered the summons.

"Hey, Come-On!" he reported, at the same time muffling the instrument. "That guy Nuckels is in the office."

"Tell him to wait. Coming down," Charley instructed him. He jumped up and then, with an afterthought, addressed the middleweight. "Want you to go with me Thursday, Joe. See Hogg. Interesting."

"But——" began Mr. Link.

Charley cut him off.

"Want you. Won't take no. Nine o'clock from here."

"Oh, all right," assented Mr. Link. "Anything to oblige." He rose to his feet. "I guess I'll be going."

"Wait a while," requested Mr. Carter. "Got a reason." He grinned and added:

"Say, Joe, put the gloves on with Skeeters. Keep him out of mischief."

With this preposterous suggestion he left the two to a strained companionship.

MR. NUCKELS came forward as Charley stepped from the elevator. He would have indulged in the compliments of the day, but Charley stopped him.

"Busy," he said curtly. "Only got a second. Talk quick."

Mr. Nuckels shot a glance at him. Yes, he was "queer," for a certainty.

"That suits me," he professed with a short laugh. "Have you got the fleas?"

"In the safe there," said Charley.

"Can I have a look at them?"

"Hogg has key," Charley answered.

"Oh!" Mr. Nuckels showed disappointment. "Well, when does he close the deal? When are you going to take them back?"

"Perhaps I won't, myself," Charley told him placidly.

"What?" Mr. Nuckels now showed alarm.

"Secretary. May send by him," said Charley. "Or messenger-boy."

Mr. Nuckels appeared to be genuinely perturbed by this announcement.

"Say!" he cried. "That won't do at all. You're responsible for those fleas."

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"Sure," said Charley.

He looked at the big clock over the desk.

"Got anything more to say? In a hurry."

Mr. Nuckels cast about him with his eyes, as if seeking an apt reply.

"I'll say this!" he blurted out. "I'll give you—hang it, I'll give you five thousand dollars if you'll tell me when Hogg wants those fleas back, and if you'll take them yourself. I want somebody present I can trust."

Charley shook his head.

"Can't promise," he objected. "Afraid of Hogg."

"Ten thousand!" urged Mr. Nuckels in his extremity.

Charley frowned reflectively. Then he said:

"Spot cash? Half down? Now?"

Mr. Nuckels recoiled from him indignantly.

"And you a millionaire!" he vociferated. "Not on your life! I'll pay you when we get to Hogg's."

"Good-by," said Charley quietly, and turned away. The interview was finished—at least so Mr. Nuckels believed.

"Wait!" he entreated.

Charley walked rapidly on. Mr. Nuckels ran after him.

"I—I'll pay," he stuttered, and there was anguish in his voice. "But it—it's not regular! Come over here in this corner."

Charley followed him stolidly. Mr. Nuckels extracted from his trousers-pocket a tremendous roll of bills and counted off from it five thousand dollars. He handed this to Mr. Carter with pained reluctance.

"I have your word of honor that you'll bring the fleas yourself?" he catechized, boring into Charley with his glittering black eyes.

The question of the day and hour seemed of less concern.

"Sure thing," Charley said. "Meet me Thursday. Half-past nine. Hogg's hotel."

This time he walked on and out into the street unhindered. Mr. Nuckels watched him go. Then, swearing fervidly to himself, he sought consolation in the bar.

Charley marched on till he rounded the corner. A taxicab came along with the flag up, and he beckoned to it. He took from his pocket a slip of paper which bore an address he had procured from the clerk at the Rirebien earlier in the day. This address he gave the driver and they started off.

When Charley returned, an hour later, he was leaning back in the taxi in a thoughtful mood. A red spot on his cuff caught his eye. He looked at it and grinned.

JUST before the car turned into Thirty-second Street on Thursday morning, Charley called to the chauffeur to stop.

"Get out," he said to Mr. Link.

"What for?"

Mr. Link evinced surprise. So did Mr. Teeters.

"Got a reason," said Charley.

Mr. Link stepped out.

"Want ten minutes' start of you," continued Charley. "Time yourself. Room Number Four. Upstairs. Don't knock. Walk in. Go on, Billy."

Billy threw in the clutch and they swept away, leaving Mr. Link staring bewilderedly at his watch.

"What's the idea, Come-On?" quizzed Mr. Teeters.

Mr. Carter contemplated his secretary with a serious face. "Joe's liver's out of order," he remarked. "Walk'll do him good."

They were at the hotel curb by now. Mr. Nuckels was waiting for them in the entrance. His countenance cleared as Charley came up the steps with the box.

"You're late!" he observed.

"Sorry. Ran over a street coming down," replied Mr. Carter.

He seemed to be in excellent spirits.

Mr. Nuckels failed to respond to this *jeu d'esprit*, but the fat lady who stood in the office door surveying them smiled massively from out her garlicky envelopment.

"Good morning," Charley greeted her. "Fine day."

To the lady's stupefaction he seized her hand and shook it heartily.

"Let's go up," Charley suggested to Mr. Nuckels, and made for the stairs.

The fat lady had fallen speechless into her chair. Charley had left a gold eagle in her palm. At the head of the stairs Mr. Nuckels touched Charley on the arm.

"Hogg has a man with him," he said. "It's Lawler—Porkington's agent. I saw him come in, and I know him. Hogg won't row with me before Lawler, so don't worry about that."

"I won't," Charley earnestly assured him.

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"And say! I'll take the other half now. Five thousand."

"When we get inside," Mr. Nuckels promised: "Come on."

Charley handed the box of fleas to Mr. Teeters.

"Take them in," he bade him. "Get a receipt. Wait for you in car."

He started back to the stairs. Mr. Nuckels swore openly, though there was a crafty light in his eyes.

"Oh, if you can't trust me, all right!" he blustered. "Here!" He produced his roll and shucked off a handful of notes which reduced it to a pitiable condition of exiguity. "I've made good, haven't I?"

"Sure," said Charley. "Real sport. Glad I met you."

He took the box from the gaping secretary and led the way to Number Four. Miss Amory opened to them. Mr. Nuckels crowded rudely past her. Charley followed, but with a smile for the girl. Mr. Teeters brought up the rear. He noted that there was a stack of bank-bills on the table, and that Charley sidled up to them.

"Here's the fleas, Jonas," proclaimed Mr. Nuckels as he entered. "I met Mr. Carter below and came up with him. Now don't excite yourself!"

"Miss Amory! The digitalis!" yapped Mr. Hogg.

The nurse went through the maneuvers familiar to Mr. Carter and his secretary, and Mr. Hogg recovered himself as usual. He had dropped on the side of the bed and was in the act of rising when Mr. Link walked in unheralded.

"Hello, Joe!" Charley hailed him. "Changed your mind? Want to see fleas?"

He glanced good-humoredly around and introduced the prize-fighter.

"Mr. Link, friends. In the glove line. Made a fortune."

The situation, which had been ominously tense, changed somewhat at these last magic words. Two rich men are better than one. Mr. Link, unable to catch Charley's drift, bowed sociably and preserved a discreet silence. Under his easy-fitting coat he did not show alarmingly his gladiator-build.

"Pleased to know you," Mr. Hogg said to him. "Gentlemen, this is Mr. Lawler, Mr. Porkington's confidential agent."

Mr. Lawler acknowledged the presentation with an abbreviated nod. His face looked as if it had been pulled out in the middle too far and pushed back at the ends too much. But that was Mr. Porkington's affair. Confidential agents are not selected for pulchritudinous perfection.

"Well, Hogg, let's get to business," spoke up Mr. Lawler. "Here's your check. Let me see the fleas again."

He laid down an imposing bank-check and glanced at the box under Charley's arm.

"What's that for?" asked Charley, pointing to the money stacked up on the table.

He put the question with such an air of bovine innocence that Mr. Hogg was constrained to smile. He wondered how this stupid millionaire had ever bested "London Harry" in the picture-game.

"That's for you," he answered—"when I find the fleas all safe. You're responsible for them."

"Sure," said Charley. "Here they are."

He placed the humidor on the table and picked up the bank-notes.

"Wait a minute!" cautioned Mr. Hogg. "Let me look at the fleas."

"Sure," repeated Charley. He put the bills back on the table, but nearer to him than before.

Mr. Link, on whose countenance a series of rapid changes had been taking place, inserted himself unobtrusively between Mr. Hogg and Charley. Mr. Nuckels and Mr. Lawler were on the opposite side of the table. Miss Amory and Mr. Teeters stood at the farther end from Mr. Hogg. The latter, who had been fumbling in his vest pocket for the key to the box, found it at last. He poked it in the lock and threw up the lid. A sharp exclamation escaped him. Mr. Nuckels and Mr. Lawler echoed the cry.

"These are *red* fleas!" cried Mr. Hogg.

"Red!" yelled his chorus, and Mr. Lawler snatched up his check.

"Gollamighty!" squeaked Mr. Teeters.

"What sort of hocus-pocus is this, sir?" demanded Mr. Hogg.

He glowered at Mr. Carter menacingly. Mr. Carter returned it with a cheerful grin.

"Gee!" he said. "Funny. You locked box. Hasn't been opened. Swear it."

Mr. Hogg's lips parted wolfishly. His excitement grew, but apparently the digitalis was forgotten.

"Bah!" he shouted. "You could get a key. Anybody could."

"But I didn't," asseverated Charley. "Told you that once."

He did not seem in the least affronted by

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the doubt cast on his veracity. On the contrary, it seemed to amuse him. Mr. Hogg, utterly regardless now of his impaired heart, flew into a passion.

"I gave you blue fleas—blue!" he raged. "And you return me these common red fleas!" You've robbed me, sir, and you'll sit right down and write me a check for a hundred and ten thousand dollars. What's more, you'll stay here till I get it cashed!"

Mr. Nuckels emitted a growl. "You bet he will!" he declared. "He's robbed me, too!"

Mr. Link looked at Charley. His Irish eyes gleamed like polished agate. But he made no sound. He was waiting.

"Sure they're red?" queried Charley. "Let me have a close peek."

He reached over and picked up the box. He set it down—quite casually, it appeared—on the stack of bills. And then a transformation scene took place. So unexpected was it that no one stirred.

Charley flashed from his overcoat pocket a sprayer of the kind that florists use. With this he drenched the interior of the box with a colorless liquid, the force of the spray carrying it easily through the wire screen.

"There's your blue fleas," he grinned, shoving the box at Hogg. "Want me to make 'em red?"

He took another sprayer from another pocket and held it up, laughing lightly.

"LOCK the door!" screeched Mr. Porkington's confidential agent.

Miss Amory sprang to obey, but Mr. Teeters beat her to it and pulled the door open. He was suddenly all awake. The girl clawed at him like a wildcat, and in return he caught her arms, whirled her about, and with a push sent her, most ungallantly, sprawling into the hall. Then he locked the door and leaned against it, blowing hard. He saw Mr. Hogg lying half on and half off the bed. The gentleman was motionless—dead to the gaieties and sorrows of this life. He had made a grab for the money on the table when Mr. Lawler screamed, and Mr. Link had cruelly tapped him on his poor weak heart. It put him soundly to sleep, and Charley gathered in the money.

Only Mr. Nuckels and Mr. Lawler remained to be considered. Mr. Link's disposition of Mr. Hogg had given them pause, but they wore an ugly look.

"Which'll you take, Joe?" sang out Charley joyously.

The light of battle was in his eyes.

"Both!" barked the fighting-man.

He stepped around the table toward them.

"No you don't!" retorted Charley.

He placed a hand on the table and vaulted over it. As he landed he swung for Mr. Nuckels' ribs, but Mr. Nuckels wasn't there. He had backed away. Mr. Link, meanwhile, was working on Mr. Lawler, who showed a bit of science and got a left hook to the middleweight's ear. Mr. Link snorted in disgust, and made a rush for Mr. Lawler to finish him. Mr. Lawler, however, leaped aside, and as he did so whipped out a gun.

"Keep off or I'll let you have it!" he snarled.

And then the confidential agent crumpled up and went down in a heap. Mr. Teeters had run forward when the fight began; and as Mr. Lawler spoke, the secretary hurled the box of fleas smack into his mouth.

"You will, will you?" he shrieked; and jumping on his fallen victim he wrenched the pistol from his nerveless grasp.

"Good boy!" commended Mr. Link.

Then he turned to Charley, for he was anxious to see how his pupil fared.

Mr. Nuckels was putting up a nasty fight—like a cornered rat. He lacked science but he was foaming mad, and he lunged savagely at Charley.

Charley was laughing happily. He danced about his man as if he were at a tango tea, and jabbed him almost playfully. Then, suddenly seeing the opening he sought, he stiffened up and sent his right like a sledge-hammer into the black-eyed gentleman's alto-relievo stomach.

That was the last of Mr. Nuckels' immediate impressions of the combat. He gave a grunt, half turned, then fell heavily and rolled over on to his back.

"Fine work!" applauded Mr. Link.

Charley glowed under the master's praise, but he knew it was not the moment for felicitations.

"Guess we'd better go," he prompted. "Got to get to a bank."

They filed out, locking the door after them. The field of battle was left to the liberated fleas. Downstairs they met the landlady. She had heard the rumpus and was a quivering mountain of jellied flesh. Miss Amory was nowhere to be seen.

Charley handed the agitated fat lady the key to Number Four.

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"Don't disturb them," he advised her pleasantly. "Gentlemen taking a nap."

THEY rolled away up-town in the red car. Charley was the first to break the silence.

"How about that trained nurse, Skeeters?" he asked, his eyes twinkling. "Blue-gingham sister?"

"Huh!" retorted Mr. Teeters, "She's trained all right. But I fooled her at the finish."

"You're all to the good, Merciful, me lad," said Mr. Link, emerging from a revery which had engulfed him. "Charley, it's a new stunt they tried to put across this time. I'll own up they got me going. What put you next?"

"Nuckels' call. Made me think. Then this," was Charley's answer.

He pulled a rag from his pocket. It was about the size of a pocket-handkerchief. The body of it was covered with fine blue spots; in fact, as if it had been sprayed on. At one end, though, the spots were red.

"Saw it in Hogg's waste-basket Monday," he explained. "Copped it out. Made me think some more."

"Think of what?" demanded Mr. Teeters, who could see through a hole in a wall—if it were as big as the Battery.

"Blue fleas," said Charley. "Showed rag to a chemist. Told him what was up. Wised him right off."

Charley paused and grinned at Mr. Link.

"Well?" persisted the pugilist.

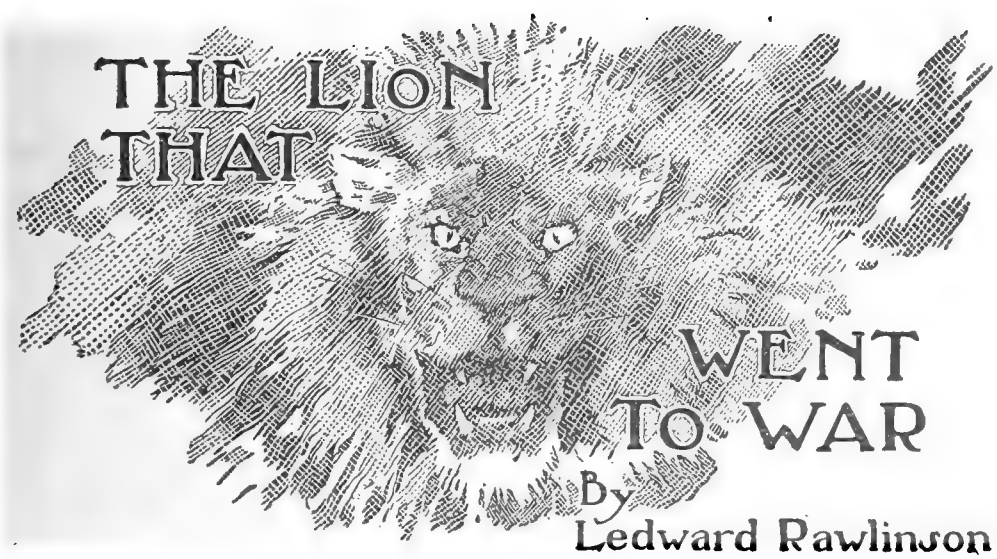
"Fleas were sprayed with litmus," proceeded Charley. "Turned them blue. Acid turns the blue to red. Alkali turns the red to blue. Guessed the game then. Pad in humidor soaked in acid. Box tight. Moisture. Great scheme!"

"Jumping Judas!" observed Mr. Teeters helplessly. "Suppose, Come-On, they tried the trick with elephants!"

Mr. Link regarded Charley with undisguised delight. "By St. Patrick!" he chuckled. "You've picked up another pail of grease to make the wheels go 'round! And it's luck ye'll be after calling it, I'm thinking—what? Just plain luck—nothing more, huh?"

"Sure," said Charley.

The next adventure of *Come-On Charley* will appear complete in the December issue.



"HALF past nine," said Flip Smith, looking up at the clock over the bar of the deserted Hotel Americano, "and we haven't had a revolution this morning. I am permeated with the thought that this Old World, red-roofed City of La Piña is suffering from Indian Summer, *dolce far niente*, sleeping sickness, paralysis of the hind-legs, and general debility. Unless somebody starts a dynastic quarrel soon I shall be down with melancholia. If I had a dozen A. D. T.

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messenger boys I'd seize the country, proclaim myself King, and invent a system of politics and graft of my own."

"I don't blame you," answered Plug Mooney. "Without any malicious intent or malice aforethought I'd give every peso I possess to see somebody dynamite the palace or massacre a thousand Cholos. They haven't killed a President or President-elect in two weeks and to me it looks as if Guadella, the present occupant of the throne of Andesia, has a steady job. I honestly believe that we've been inundated with a tidal wave of reform. Somebody's giving us telepathic treatment over the long-distance wire or praying for us at the Thursday evening meeting. We might as well be in Illinois."

Flip grunted his approval and for a time the pair of them sat pondering in silence over the trials and troubles that beset a man's life until he makes his first million. As they do this, let the story halt for a moment that you may be given a little information in regard to the cast. The scene of the drama, as you have guessed, is South America, that little suburb of Panama where the Gonzalezes, and the Gomezes, and the parrots, and the coconuts come from.

Flip was a little bit of a fellow, inclined to obesity and oratory, with a non-union, half finished look to his face, like a fence before it gets a second coat of paint. Plug was seven or eight feet high, all bones and angles,with blue eyes and red hair to match. Originally, these two financial filibusters came to the broad-hat-and-blanket countries with a moving-picture machine and a repertoire consisting of six one-thousand-foot films, but unfortunately the *Teatro Municipal* at Punta Blanca went up in flames about three o'clock one morning, and everything was lost, including six orchestra chairs and five dollars' worth of advertising literature.

After the holocaust, Flip and Plug set out to make a dishonest living with a preparation guaranteed to turn black eyes blue. For several months the harvest was golden, but one evening at a ball in the Frijole Club at La Piña, Plug grew a little skittish under the influence of *Anis del Mono* and playfully cracked the Secretary of State's skull, a most undiplomatic thing to do. From that time forth the two were *persona au gratin* at the palace and business declined very rapidly.

"Plug, I've got an idea," said Flip, leaning across the little marble-topped table, "and it's right in line with our preconceived intentions of educating the heathen peoples of South America to a better understanding of the ways of the world, the flesh, and the diagnostician."

"'Taint homeopathic pills again, is it?" inquired Plug with a dreamy, faraway look in his eyes.

Flip shook his head.

"No, señor," he declared emphatically. "We're through with stomach-strengtheners and pimple-eradicators and all the classic mythology that surrounds the practise of medicine. There's another profession open that is less technical in detail and more lengthy of duration. I refer to the ancient and honorable circus business."

PLUG leaned back in his chair and dropped his arms to his sides. "Circus business?" he exclaimed in amazement.

Flip held up his hand.

"Don't look at me like that," he commanded. "Allow me to explain. There's not a man, woman or child in this smellful Andean city that has the remotest idea of what the beasts of the jungle look like. They're in just the same mentally comatose condition as the Romans were when Christopher Columbus formally opened the Atlantic Ocean to traffic and trade.

"They never travel, never. If a native son takes a fifty-mile muleback ride he gets the key of the city when he returns and gives travelogue lectures in the slaughter-house for the rest of his life.

"Now listen," continued Flip. "Francisco Carillo, that little knee-booted Spaniard who always sits in the Plaza, blinking his eyes in the sun, is a lion-tamer by profession. He was with an English circus that went broke in Valparaiso and he drifted up here to the pampa, where the wildest thing ever seen is a drunken Cholo homeward bound from a *fiesta* or a Gringo driving his wife's people over the Cordilleras.

"Carillo's lonesome to see the kerosene lamps ablaze and to hear the cheers of the crowd as he makes the beasts of the jungle and the fishes of the sea jump through a hoop. Let's give him some money and send him back to Chile to see if he can't get a cheap, yet noble and majestic lion from his old menagerie. If he succeeds, then we'll

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offer him a steady job at two hundred pesos a month to put the four-footed body-snatcher through a formation of tricks for the benefit of the oakum-colored natives of Andesia. They'll come in hundreds and thousands to see the show. It'll be like getting money from home."

Plug meditated a while.

"I ain't much on menthol arithmetic," he observed at length, "but I penetrate your intentions nevertheless."

Then and there the articles of incorporation and by-laws of Smith & Mooney's Great American Circus were drawn up.

FLIP and Plug rose next morning in perfect condition. After breakfast they sought out Carillo, a little 'dobie-colored son of Seville, dressed in a black coat, wide corduroy trousers, and dark cloth cap. He was seated on a bench in the Plaza, dreaming of his home across the sea and wondering where his next bottle of red wine would come from.

"Spaniard," said Flip, "would you like a job?"

Francisco's eyes opened wide.

"Sí, señor," he answered briskly.

"Then hearken unto me," said Flip, sitting down and plunging into explanations.

Carillo listened intently, straining his ears to catch every word.

"*Madre de Dios!*" he cried at length, springing to his feet and embracing the two Americans. "*Muchissimas gracias.* I kiss your hands."

Presently, when the Seidlitz powder of his spirits had subsided, the circus proprietors invited him into a near-by café, and there with the aid of several bottles of wine and miscellaneous fluids they cemented their friendships in the time-worn manner of men.

Plug's Spanish vocabulary wasn't very large, but he insisted on making a speech just the same.

"Señor Carillo," he began, "as an Americano I welcome you into our circus. I have always had a *caliente* spot in my heart for Spanish people ever since a Greaser shot the Sheriff of Pima County. I don't care much about *tortillas* or *frijoles*, but I once knew a señorita whose *padre* was a caball—a caball—— Oh, shucks. I'm sorry I ever learned your language."

Then he sat down and the merriment continued until a very late hour.

Next morning, the excited Spaniard left La Piña with full instructions and all the necessary cash. To drive away the weariness of waiting, Flip and Plug got drunk, practised shooting on the Cathedral bell, and generally transgressed the law of the Prophet. They paid ten fines for disorderly conduct and spent three days in jail. But even then *ennui* sat heavily upon them.

They were very miserable. The sole diversion in a week was a public execution in front of the Cathedral, and down in the sleepy black-and-tan countries these things get very monotonous.

SUDDENLY a revolution broke out and the city took on a brighter aspect right away. All day long there was ferment in the air. The streets were crowded with gaily-clad Indians and half breeds, many-skirted, stockily built women, thin soldiers and mongrel dogs. All night long the hills blazed with bonfires. The people danced and drank and jokingly slashed one another with machetes. The only unhappy man in the country was the President. He was afraid of his life and his job.

The first battle took place in a sheltered spot about ten miles from La Piña and raged for six consecutive hours, excepting, of course, the usual stops for breakfast, luncheon and afternoon tea. There was a great crowd of spectators, but thanks to the Intendente de Policia perfect order was maintained. Greatly to the disappointment of the audience, however, it commenced to rain about five o'clock, and as the rebels did not care to ruin the polish on their brand new Hotchkiss mountain-gun, the fight was declared off for the day.

Three days went by. The Government troops fought like farmers under a hot blazing sun, but in spite of their flying wedges and flatiron shrapnel they lost a little more ground at every engagement. The booming of the enemy's cannon could now be heard in the city. The President grew sullen and morose and stopped shaving.

ONE Sunday afternoon, as Flip and Plug sat in the Café del Ferrocarril drinking absinthe with a group of gold-braided army Generals home on a week end's furlough from the firing-line, Carillo rushed breathlessly into the room and announced that the lion was safe and

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sound in the freight-house. With a yell that brought the plaster from the ceiling, the two Americans welcomed the little Spaniard and ordered champagne for every one in sight. Before long Carillo was standing on one of the little tables singing the songs of Seville and exhibiting proudly the scars that wild animals of all nationalities had inflicted upon his body. It was a great jubilation.

The shades of night were falling fast when the three circus men, locked in each other's arms, started for the railroad station a few blocks from the hotel to inspect the savage beast. Suddenly the stillness was broken by a long, angry roar. Every hut emitted a mob of fear-stricken natives in various stages of attire.

"He's loose," cried Plug, pulling his gun. "Stand back. Women and children first."

"No, señor," said Carillo, embracing the gunman affectionately. "Nero is just a little excited, that's all."

Plug crept cautiously forward through the crowd.

"I hope he's packed good and tight," he whispered. "The cardinal signs indicate to me that the animal has a carnivorous longing to meet somebody."

"That lion's hungry," observed Flip wisely. "If we give him a few railroad-ties for supper he'll go to sleep. It's too bad the blooming revolution is monopolizing all the public interest and giving them free entertainment. It won't be any use giving a perforamnce till it's over. A little while ago when we pined for an insurrection there was nothing doing. It's always the way."

A few moments later the trio staggered into the 'dobe freight-house. In a little room lighted by a sputtering tallow candle stood a heavy case about eight feet high and fourteen feet long, perforated in places with air holes. From out this case came the most fearful, blood-chilling noises.

"This is the lion, señors," shouted the Spaniard above the din.

"What makes him so vehement?" yelled Flip.

Paying no attention to the question, Carillo unlocked and unbolted the front of the case. Behind a row of iron bars was a monstrous lion with a great shaggy mane and an evil, glistening eye. His fangs were fearful to behold.

"Holy Moses!" shouted Plug. "That ain't no circus lion. It's a man-eater, a census-reducer. It seems to me that the lions I see one Summer at Coney Island was not so rabid-looking as this."

Flip backed away from the cage.

"He is kinder malicious of aspect when you look him full in the face," said he.

"Señors," retorted Carillo, "Nero is as sweet and gentle as a señorita. We have been together many years. He is the most gentle lion that ever lived. He will take a piece of sugar from the hand, ride you on his back, sit on a chair, jump through a hoop, and open his mouth for you to put your head inside. You have got him cheap, very cheap."

With this explanation the Spaniard moved over to the door of the freight-house, closed it, and returned to the side of the cage.

"I will let my beauty out," said he, picking up a paper hoop, "that I may demonstrate——"

Like a flash of lightning Flip and Plug shot out of the freight-house and through the streets. Completely exhausted, they dropped at last on to a bench in the Plaza.

"Flip," said Plug, struggling hard for breath, "I want you to absolve me from any and all allegiance to that animal. You and me have been through much chicanery together since we left the U. S. of America for the U. S. of America's good. We've ate together, slept together, and been to jail together. No brothers was ever closer since Cain disabled Abel. I've always carried my share of the pack, split the spoils, and painted iodine landscapes on your bosom when you got your annual attack of pleurisy. I'll help you do anything in our own particular line of deceivery that will satisfy the unnatural desires of the human heart, but I'm through with the circus business. You can have my right, title and interest in it henceforth and for ever more, also my blessing. Life's too limited."

"What's biting you now, you—you web-footed son of a bricklayer?" growled Flip.

"I've just got a hunch," answered Plug, "that's all. I feel in the palms of my hands a deadly premonition that we must beware of a large, four-footed animal that answers to the name of Nero."

FOR half an hour they cursed in a solemn, friendless way. Then Flip rose and wound his way back to the freight-house. But Carillo had gone and the place was in darkness. The lion was

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still filling the landscape with his awful roar. It was a wretched night. No one in that section of the city had a wink of sleep. About ten o'clock next morning Carillo came tapping on the door of Flip's room. He could not possibly have come at a worse time, for the American was feeling very mean for want of sleep.

"Hello, little sunbeam," said Flip. "What seekest thou?"

"Señor," replied the Spaniard, "I would like five hundred pesos to buy meat for the lion."

Flip pricked up his ears.

"How long will that last?"

"Two days, señor."

"*Dios mio!*" screamed Flip, jumping out of bed. "How many bulls and bovines can that roaring mammal of yours masticate in one twenty-four-hour day?"

Carillo backed away toward the wall.

"Nero has not been fed for seventy-two hours," he explained. "The poor beast is very hungry and the cost of food is high."

"Spaniard!" exclaimed Flip with an artistic oath. "This ain't no Morgan-Rockefeller combination that you've got tangled up in, and until we take in some real financial money at the box office that King of Beasts will have to go on a diet. Besides, a lion with an indoor job ought to eat meat only once in a while. It would be different if he was out in the African jungles killing hippopotamuses, buffaloes, missionaries and blacks all day long. Then he'd need a lot of meat to keep his strength up. I was driving a team of lions before you was born, you little sallow-skinned anarchist from the realm of Alfonso."

Tears came into Carillo's big black eyes. His face was full of anguish.

"Señor," he said quietly. "I go. I shall not return. *Adiós para siempre.*"

"Hold on," shouted Flip. "I didn't——"

But the Spaniard had been grossly insulted. He turned dramatically and left the room. Disgusted over the outlook, Flip ordered two bottles of *aquadiente* and spent the rest of the day in bed, drowning his sorrows in drink. He was hopeful that Plug might pay him a visit, but in this he was disappointed. It was not until the following morning that the ex-partner appeared.

"Flip," said he, as he dropped into a chair, "while it's none of my business, I want to inform you that your lion is about to become a prehistoric monster. He's as weak as a cat that's been shut up in a house all Summer. He's ate up nearly half of his cage, but vegetarian diet don't seem to agree with him, for I see he's starting in on his hind-legs now. He's going to obey his primeval instincts and eat himself alive."

Flip's face grew very sad.

"I'm up against it, Plug," he murmured. "You've quit and the Spaniard's quit. I'm alone in the world with a strange lion."

Plug grew very sympathetic. It is hard to to see a brother in distress. Before long he back again as a partner in the Great American Circus, back with his old pal. His first official act was to buy the dried and desiccated carcass of a sheep, and while Flip was scouring the neighborhood in the hope of finding Carillo and inducing him to return, the lion broke his fast. The poor animal fell upon the mutton with a roar of savage delight that echoed its way across the hills for miles, and in a few minutes not a scrap of meat, or bone, or tissue, or tendon was to be found. Of course this made him feel better, but he still remained unsatisfied. Pawing and clawing and vociferating, he demanded more food.

There was no satisfying the hunger of that quadruped. During the next forty-eight hours he destroyed one cow, three sheep, four llamas, one hundred pounds of steak, twenty-five pounds of chops, and half a misguided Indian. *Table d'hote, à la carte*, or *à la* cartload was all the same to Nero. He had the appetite of a seventeen-year locust, and the disposition of a Spanish bull. His everlasting roar kept the natives in a perpetual state of alarm and denied sleep to every one within a radius of half a mile of the freight-house. It was awful. Finally the Intendente advised the circus proprietors that unless the noise ceased the animal would have to be killed as a public nuisance.

There was only one way in which to keep the brute quiet, and that was to feed him. Luckily he was not hard to please. He ate anything from dog to deviled ham, from steers to sardines. But he drew the line at peanuts. In the hope that the revolution would end and thus rob the public of a source of free entertainment, Flip and Plug embarked upon a riotous career of reckless expenditure for the lion's board. At the end of a week they were both broke, and though they hunted the highways and byways for

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Carillo in order to get a little counsel and advice, the little Spaniard was nowhere to be found.

"I never dreamed lions was such gluttons," observed Plug. "Let's send a cable to Benson, Arizona, and see whether the City Council will buy Nero for a garbage destroyer."

But Flip was too sore to answer in words. He just gesticulated.

SOON the King of the Jungle began wailing again, and though the neighbors stuffed their ears with cotton and tried every other modern method of mufflage, sleep was out of the question. One morning Plug could stand the noise no longer. Using the most awful dialect imaginable, he jumped out of bed and, gun in hand, made for the freight-house for a little big-game hunting before breakfast. The door of the hut was locked, but in a blaze of murderous passion he smashed it open and entered. Nero was now very abusive. His face was puckered with fury and he was spitting fire and brimstone. White with rage, Plug stood by the cage shaking his fist at the unhappy lion and muttering wicked words. Then he raised his rifle, but just as his finger crept to the trigger, Flip entered the condemned cell.

"What's the matter?" he demanded sharply.

"Oh nothing," answered the would-be shotsman somewhat sheepishly. "I was just a scaring him, that's all."

Flip smiled grimly.

"Plug," said he, "half of that wild animal belongs to me, and while I admit that both halves of him deserves a violent and lingering death, followed by not less than twenty years in the Smithsonian Institute, yet I have conceived an idea which induces me to believe that we may be able to profit by the worthless prowler after all. Therefore, I pray you spare the heavy hand of chastisement for a moon or two and I will explain my ideas."

"Proceed with the oratory," said Plug. "But remember we're broke financially."

Flip sat down on a bale of vicuña skins.

"Listen," he directed, folding his arms. "Late last night I heard some awful news. After a long and bloodless encounter the Government troops have been compelled to surrender to the rebels. The entire Federal army, consisting of two hundred and fifty men and three hundred and forty Generals, have been taken prisoners, handcuffed and vaccinated. The enemy is now camped just down the valley, and they've served notice that *mañana* at twelve o'clock prompt they're going to take the city and all that dwell therein.

"The natives are so excited they can't eat their *frijoles*, but, strategically speaking, our situation is critical, darned critical. The President is scared stiff, stark and rigid, too afraid even to attempt to escape. His equanimity is completely disturbed. Now put on your thinking-cap. Suppose the rebels were marching up the hill and they met Nero, the four-footed food-devastator, coming down the trail, can you imagine what would happen?"

"I sure can," answered Plug with a grin. "I'd like a photograph of it to send to the comic editors of all the Sunday newspapers in America."

Flip lighted a cigarette.

"All right," said he. "I'll put on my gala drapery, go to the palace, and explain our patriotic plan to his Excellency *El Presidente* Guadella. If we quash that revolution he'll reinstate us in society, make us Generals in the army, and give us anything we ask for. I see obeisance and opulence staring us in the face."

"That's a slick scheme all right," laughed Plug. "Go to it. I'll aid and abet you all I can."

Back they went to the hotel. Half an hour later, all embellished in a light check suit, with a yellow cane swinging gaily on his arm and a high hat on his head, Flip strolled forth to the palace on his irreligious mission. In two hours' time he returned, looking like a bride with her first groom.

"Plug," said he in his grand-ducal way as he laid his hat on the table and took off his gloves, "the outlook has platinum-and-gold edges. After knocking down several attachés, Ambassadors, and other members of the royal family, I climbed under the bed and had an interview with the President, first of all assuring him that I was bent on neither assassination nor intrigue. Just the moment I outlined our proposition to him he put his arm round my neck and called me his *hermanito*, his little brother, tying the pink silk ribbons and calla lilies on our friendships once again.

"The end of the pow-wow was this. The minute his Excellency receives advices that

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the rebel army has retreated before Nero the noxious, we get a little honorarium of twenty-five thousand pesos, ten thousand acres of land, four copper mines, three gold-bearing rivers, two mountains with a private hot spring attached, five railroad concessions, one match monopoly, two Government jobs, and a house on the Alameda. Wouldn't that scarify you?"

"It's a shame to take it," answered Plug. "Those New York bank presidents'll never speak to us again when they hear the news. Let's go down to the *cantina* and see whether our credit's still good for a little thanksgiving."

Flip put on his hat.

"All right," said he. "But don't forget one thing. This pernicious procedure has to be kept very quiet. The President doesn't want anybody to know just how he suppressed the revolution. It must be done with the utmost secrecy and despatch. Not a word must get into the newspapers."

Plug, of course, knew the reason why, but when night fell the two were in a hopeless state of hilarity and the whole town knew of the proposed massacre. Guadella was furious.

SOMEWHAT ashamed of themselves, the conspirators started work next morning in full view of the populace. First they got a wagon pulled by a couple of mules, an ox, and a burro. Then they hired a squad of Indians to load the lion's cage thereon. Needless to say, Nero resented the operation in the usual manner, but eventually the work was done, and Plug, dressed in a Prince Albert coat with high hat to match, took his position alongside of his check-suited partner.

Preceded by eight sad-faced Indians in wide pantaloons and bright-colored ponchos, and followed by a mob of God-speeding citizens, the procession started for the valley road. The entire population turned out to see the sight, cheering Flip and Plug most vociferously as they rode like potentates of old through the streets. The ladies threw roses and confetti from their windows, the band played the national anthem, the lion roared. It was a great ovation, but it did not affect the two Americans one bit. Calm and serene and bashful as ever, they bore their honors and high hats well, bowing gracefully whenever they sighted a pretty girl.

Presently the city with its volleys of acclaim was left behind, though a number of uninvited well-wishers still tagged along in the rear. His face all beaming with delight, Flip turned to his fellow buccaneer.

"Plug," says he, "I must confess that this appeals to my inborn esthetic taste. I know now what the Raja of Johore feels like when he rides down Piccadilly on an elephant in a coronation procession, and I know what the Gaekwar of Baroda is thinking about when he rides up Fifth Avenue to his hundred-thousand-dollar room with bath at the Plaza. What a worthy culmination to a checkered and chicanerious career! It sounds like a tale out of Arabian Nights or a dream of Midas, doesn't it?"

Plug's face grew very sad.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, "but I feel in the palms of my hands——"

Just then the Indians halted the wagon. They had reached the valley road, a narrow, white trail at the foot of which the rebels were camped. Here Flip and Plug engaged in a disgraceful dialogue as to the best way to start the man-eater on his path of wo and destruction, and only after much impiety of speech was it agreed that the cage should be removed from the wagon, dragged a hundred yards down the trail, and then opened by one of the Indians to allow Nero to escape.

It was an exhausting task, for the sun beat down upon them as only an equatorial sun can. The noise and bustle and shaking annoyed the King of the Jungle greatly; he snarled and growled in a terrifying manner, scaring the Indians almost helpless. They would have absconded to a man if Flip had not pulled his gun and used bad language. Ten minutes passed. At last the cage was lowered to the ground and hauled to its appointed position. Then it was that Plug grew nervous and shaky in the legs.

"Flip," he whimpered, "suppose the brute jumps over the cage and starts up the trail instead of down, according to program? He'll massacre us all with that appetite of his. I feel in the palms of my hands——"

"Cut it out," bellowed Flip, with an impressive Western quotation. "You haven't the backbone of a boiled cod. That animal is going to go down the trail all right, leave it to me. I've just got an idea that'll fix him for sure."

With that the Commander in Chief sent

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one of the Indians to the market place with an order on the President for a slab of raw meat. Plug volunteered to go on the errand, but for very good reasons his offer was not accepted. After a weary wait of half an hour, the Indian returned, bearing twenty-five per cent. of a cow on his back. Poor Plug was now on the brink of nervous prostration. His eyes were rolling, his teeth chattering, and his whole face streamed with sweat. Cool as an iced watermelon, Flip put the meat just outside the cage. One sniff and Nero was crazy, absolutely crazy.

With the cunning of a master mind, Flip then dragged the dainty two-hundred-pound morsel to a point about two hundred feet down the trail and left it there. By this time the lion was ready for a strait-jacket. He broke one of his best front teeth trying to bite his way through the iron bars; just plumb loco he was. The crowd at the head of the trail was breathless with excitement.

PLUG'S spirits rose with a jump when he saw the clever trap that his old pal had left. In a few minutes all was ready for the great event, and not an hour too soon, for up the hill came sounds indicating that the rebels were preparing for their murderous attack upon La Piña. Even now their scouts could be seen sneaking up the hillsides on their hands and knees. All of a sudden Nero shattered the air and blighted the vegetation with an extra awful blast.

That was too much for the Indians. In one immortal bound they fled up the trail, muttering supplications for mercy as they ran. The spectators enjoyed the joke immensely, but Flip was very wroth. He lifted his arms in the air and invoked upon every brunette-colored republic in the world all the trouble and tribulation he could think of. He growled like a dog and looked mad enough to have hydrophobia.

A while later, however, he calmed himself and climbed laboriously to the top of the cage. Slowly, and with great caution, he drew out three of the iron bars that kept the lion a prisoner, then leaped away from his precarious position. The spectators stood with mouths agape and eyes wide. A long minute passed. The agony of sus-suspense was awful, positively awful. Two minutes dragged by, three minutes. Slowly the King of the Jungle emerged fron his den. What a big brute he was!

At a safe distance the two Americans stood holding their breaths and awaiting developments. For a time Nero stood stretching himself, following which he looked carefully and critically over the landscape as if thinking of buying real estate. Soon the wind wafted in his nostrils the smell of meat. He sniffed the air joyously for a second, uttered a low growl, then started down the trail. With an exultant shout Flip and Plug clung to each other in a fond embrace and wept with joy as they crept slowly forward to watch and wait. Twenty minutes dragged painfully by. Nothing now remained of the food; Nero stood lickling his lips and waving his tail in the air.

"It's too bad I didn't put another meal a little lower down," said Flip, tremulously, "but it can't be helped now."

Plug was too keyed up to answer. The crisis had come. A minute passed, a minute that was an hour. Without a note of warning, the beast wheeled in his tracks and started for the city! Panic struck the two men then and there. They fled in terror, and the spectators did likewise, howling and shrieking and praying for help. At the top of the hill Flip and Plug turned for a second in their mad flight. Nero had changed his mind. He was now loping back again down the valley!

Insane with delight, the two watched him disappear behind a bend in the trail. Success had crowned their efforts at last. They hugged and patted each other and kicked their high hats over the cliff.

For a quarter of an hour everything in the valley below was quiet and still. All at once the quiet was broken by a strange noise, the noise of hundreds of excited voices, shouting and yelling. Louder and louder it grew. The lion had done his deadly work.

Flip and Plug danced and sang with glee; their joy knew no bounds. Swelled to bursting with pride, they took the trail once more and with rapid strides rushed down the valley to gloat over the disordered retreat of the enemy. Suddenly at the turn of the road they came to a halt.

The revolutionists had not retreated as per arrangement. They were seated in a great circle. In the center of this circle was a man and a lion. The man's name was Francisco Carillo, late of Smith & Mooney's Great American Circus, and the lion's name was Nero. And Nero, cowed and trembling, was performing tricks!

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Eddie Haynes Lightweight

by

Allan Dunn

EDDIE HAYNES, lightweight, lay face downward in the fragrant fern. The vagrant trade-wind, roving up the cañon, mingled the tang of the sea with the spice of manzanita, madroña and chamisal, the odor of buckeye blooms and ripening berries, the balm of the giant redwoods, through which the stream prattled, ocean-bound.

The sun was leaving the pools; the big rainbow trout were rising to the evening hatch; but his rod lay idly beside him, as, insensible of the warm glory of the Californian afternoon, he kept the position he had held through the long hours—his hot head buried on folded arms, tasting the bitterness of defeat.

He went over it all for the hundredth time, pictures and phrases jerking at random through his tired brain, like an ill-assembled kinetoscopic film.

A week ago! He was champion. The champion light-weight of the world! Admired, sought after, touted throughout the sporting sphere. His bank-account had leaped by the thousands; contracts were his to pick and choose and dictate.

Now he seemed to have lost everything. He had quarreled with his manager, lost the title, his capacity to earn the big money, his popularity. According to the press-writers he had lost his punch and, thrust back at every persistent appearance, was the sense of the loss that troubled him most of all—the loss of his self-respect.

He had not been beaten by the better man. But he had been beaten effectively, as his bruised face and aching body still attested. Subconscious, almost automatic skill alone had saved him the complete humiliation of a knockout, and kept him on staggering but effective feet through the last half dozen heartbreaking rounds, when he had battled in a gray fog.

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Of his exit from the ring, where he was wont to stand triumphant, he remembered nothing. The headline that paraphrased the account of the dean of all the sporting-writers flickered across his mind, repeating the red-ink scareheads of the extras—

"Eddie Haynes Has Lost His Punch."

Then came the mocking face of Al Renny, champion now, grinning as he took the once-famous right cross to the jaw as if it had been a playful buffet. A dull rage possessed him. He would show them yet! But back of the desire, behind the sullen determination, sounded ever the persistent prophesies of the flippant paragraphers, burying a defeated champion with their parrot-cry "they never come back."

And it had been his own fault! Overconfidence, disgust of the constant training grind, a little dalliance along the primrose way. Then the alarm! The realization that his blows had lost their power, the dizzy seconds after the crushing blow that had sent him to the floor, the desperate rally, the growing weakness—his own fault, his own fault!

He groaned in rage and self-pity, then half turned, resting on one elbow, looking upward at the sound of the voice that had broken his reverie.

"Are you hurt? Oh, you are!"

A girl stood gazing at him. A girl in a blue gingham gown, a girl with brown hair that held rainbows in its mesh; with blue eyes looking down pityingly at him.

"No," he said ungraciously. "Nothing the matter."

"But your face!"

He flushed resentfully, but as the girl bent over him with sympathetic concern he relented. This was real and somehow soothing, this pity expressed in the troubled eyes, the little pucker of the smooth brows, the parted scarlet lips.

"Aw, that's nothing," he said. "That's old stuff."

"How did it happen?—I beg your pardon."

He had flushed again, conscious of his discolored face.

"Aw, that's all right. You see there was a big pot of money and two of us were trying to get it. I lost."

"Oh!"

He got up and stood facing her, leaning against the trunk of a great redwood. Eddie was no giant, being a lightweight, but the slim figure, with a suggestion of boyishness despite its curves of ripening maidenhood, was shorter than his by a head. Her solicitation changed as he rose. She viewed him covertly from under long lashes, admiring the symmetry of his athletic form that showed through the well fitting outing-suit.

"Set me back about ten thousand bucks, this decorating," he went on, smiling. "Sixteen thou' to the winner, six to the loser. It was a championship, you know. I'm Eddie Haynes!"

"Oh!" she said again vaguely. "You're a——"

"I'm nothin'. I *was* champion lightweight of the world. Shocked?"

"Me? Why, no. There's no harm in fighting, I guess. When it's square. Dad says——"

"I'm *for* you! You're a sport! Eddie Haynes was *my* name, I said."

He held out his hand. It was her turn to flush. She put her slim, cool fingers into his.

"Mine's Marion Whitney. Dad is John Whitney—'Pop' Whitney they call him. I guess you've heard of him."

"Pop Whitney, trainer for Calford University? Sure I have. He figures on my page—the sports page, you know. He's quit, ain't he?"

"Yes; he retired last year. So we came up here. He bought the Bennet place—next to yours."

"Then we're neighbors! Fine! Been fishing?"

She displayed a string of rainbows.

"Want some? Oh, you have your rod."

"I didn't fish. I've been kicking myself."

"Over losing? That's bound to happen sometimes, isn't it? It shouldn't matter so much, if you tried your best."

He looked at her frankly.

"I didn't. Oh, I didn't quit, but I—I just thought I was better than I shaped. Get me?"

"You didn't train properly? I know how that is. I love athletics, you know, and I always wanted to be a boy. I guess dad wanted it too, but I try to make it up, so we always chum together; and he tells me all about his handling his boys."

"Some trainer, too, take it from me. I never met your dad yet. I'd like to. We're neighbors, you know."

"Of course," laughed Marion. "When do you want to meet him?"

"Could I come over after supper?"

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"Why, you seem able to walk," she laughed merrily. "Of course you can. But I've got to go or dad won't get his supper. I cross over here."

They walked to the hurrying stream and Eddie watched her as she sprang lightly across the fallen tree that bridged it.

"Now there's some girl!" he said aloud blithely, his mood forgotten. "Some girl and some sport, believe me! I'll have to dope up this map of mine before I break in on the family. Never feazed *her*, though. Some classy little sport!"

"I'VE never fallen very hard for that 'never-come-back' stuff, Eddie," said Pop Whitney. "I'll wager you never were in better shape in your life than you are right now, barring the lack of sparring-practise. You could come back this minute."

"If I ever get a chance," replied Eddie. "But I'm sure fit, and I could lick Al Renny any old time I was half right."

"It's the first time I ever trained a fighter," chuckled Whitney. "Mostly I've laid out to teach 'em how to run. But I'm proud of you, son. You're free-muscled and long-winded and hard as nails. I could break some Coast records with you if you'd go on the track."

There was no doubt about the fitness of Eddie. Two months of clean living under Whitney's simple dietary had purged his splendid physique of the last dregs of impurity.

"What d'ye weigh, Eddie?" asked the old trainer, lighting his pipe.

"Hundred and thirty-seven in the buff, and I'm as hard as nails. If I could get a chance—just one crack at Renny!"

His eyes sparkled as he danced lightly backward, sparring at an imaginary opponent.

"Say, Pop, break into the game! Be my manager."

"Not me, son. I don't know that end of sport. Why don't you quit an' settle down? You like ranching."

"I've thought some of settling down," said Eddie quietly, reddening as the older man looked at him quizzically. "But I'm going to have one crack at the record yet. I'll be the original come-back champion—and I'll knock the grin off Renny's map. Here's Marion. Coming with us?"

Whitney shook his head as Marion, trim-skirted in khaki, emerged from the house.

"When you're my age, Eddie, you'll prefer a quiet nap," he said.

THE blue Pacific lay pulsing lazily, far below, the beat of its surf coming faintly, harmonizing with the wind in the hill-top pines.

"I finished the book, Marion," said Eddie, asprawl along the earth-rug of brown needles. "It was fine! Those Roman guys were sure sports. But I don't get that fighting with iron mitts. You might as well wear brass knuckles and be done with it."

"They were pretty cruel those days," replied the girl, her hands clasped about her knees, looking out over the plumy tree-tops beneath them.

"Same stuff right now. Same old turn-down-the-thumb junk. Say, I've heard 'em! Maybe you've got the lead, but you're resting—see?—letting him tire, or trying him out—maybe. Perhaps he gets in a good one on you—an' the crowd lets out a roar like a pack of hungry coyotes. Guys who bet on me, y'see, at odds on, sore. Short-enders happy. Just their money talking. That's all they care about."

"Dad says fighting's all right as a sport, but it got spoiled when they made a business of it. The name's wrong he says—*prize*-fighting, as if it was all for the stake."

"It's a great game, though. Great!" His eyes sparkled; his chest filled with the excitement of past conquests. "It don't last long. It ain't a life job. I'm going to quit it, Marion—after I come back."

"What are you going to do?"

He looked at her eagerly, and a crimson glow crept up beneath the tan of her cheek. He checked himself.

"Me? Oh, lots of things. I'm going to settle down, I hope. But I want to travel first—if I can find some one to go with. I ain't strong on the education stuff. Your dad says travel's the best college. I can catch up most of what I want to get by with. You see, I was selling papers the time most kids are studying. When—when I'm back, Marion, will you help me on the getaway to a new start?"

The girl looked at him with tender eyes.

"You're a dear boy, Eddie," she said, "but let's wait a bit."

"How am I going to know when the time comes? I'm strong for you, Marion. I

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ain't much, but I'll make good—for you."

"I'll let you know when it comes," she answered. "We've got to be getting back."

THERE was a big touring-car outside his ranch-house when Eddie reached home. Visitors were not infrequent. Old ringmates and men who followed the game dropped in from time to time on their trips to the resorts and springs of Mendocino County. Usually they were welcome, but today he resented the intrusion. He wanted to be alone, to think over Marion's answer, to go over to Whitney's after supper on the excuse of taking back the book; to see Marion, to listen to her, talk with her—this frank wonder-girl who liked him; this maid-woman, so different from the world-wise ones he had always known.

A short, stout man with shrewd, kindly eyes rose from the deep porch to meet him. Behind him lounged a lanky, angular figure, blinking behind glasses, smoking a lazy cigarette.

"Been waiting for you two hours, Eddie! I want a talk with you. You remember Benny here?"

They shook hands. Eddie knew both his visitors quite well. Tim Hopworth, "Fair-weather Tim," the boxing-magnate, impresario of Western fights, the man who staged the big outdoor events, gambling on the good nature of the California weather—and winning nine times out of ten. And Benny Hunter, expert dope-producer and chronicler of contests, the man who had said Eddie Haynes had lost his punch! Yes, Eddie remembered Benny.

"We'll talk after supper, Eddie," said Hopworth. "If you can give us some grub."

They fared heartily. There were firm, broad-shouldered, salmon-fleshed rainbow, fresh vegetables, and luscious fruit from the ranch; and good Sonoma wine for the guests. Not for the host! All through the meal Eddie was conscious of the promoter's appraising eyes as he listened to Hunter's easy flow of sporting jargon. At last they went out to the cool porch, Hopworth with his cigar, Hunter with his ever renewed cigarette.

"Tidy place you've got, Eddie," said Hopworth. "Quit the game?"

"Guess it quit me."

"Oh, I don't know. You seem in shape."

"Never better," Eddie nodded confidently.

"Ah! Think you could put up a fight with Renny?"

Eddie got up from his chair.

"Say!" he exclaimed. "You kidding?"

"Got no time for it," replied Hopworth. "See here, Eddy, I'll give it to you straight. I've got Renny for July fourth."

"Yes, with Terry Sloane, the Britisher. He can't lick Al though. He's got no punch."

"He's got appendicitis," put in Hunter.

"I can get the Mexican, of course," went on Hopworth; "but he don't draw in San Francisco. You got sore and dug out, Eddie, but you've got lots of friends."

"And some record!" added Hunter.

"You're a native son and Renny ain't. That helps. It's a good thing to keep the title in the State. I've kept tabs on you, Eddie. The boys have tipped me how you've been shaping. I don't say you can break the come-back hoodoo, but I'm willing to give you the match—if we can come to terms."

"I'll fight him, winner take all," said Eddie eagerly.

"Don't be a boob," said Hunter good-naturedly. "Who's your manager, Haynes? McCann's ready to stand back of you."

"McCann's a crook! I'm through with him. I'll manage myself. I can't handle the press-stuff, though."

"Hopworth'll help you out for that," said Benny. "I'll find you a smart chap who'll line out your dope and won't rob you. Tim here won't rob you either, if you don't let him," he grinned. "Take my tip and get a percentage of the gate. Renny gets in on the pictures, of course."

"Well," said Hopworth, "if you'll stand some more of that claret, Eddie, we'll talk business. I guess we can come to terms."

THE big open-air arena was packed to a record gate. The preliminaries were over, and the crowd—much of it shirt-sleeved and bare-headed in the genial sunshine—waited impatiently for the main event.

The odds had been beaten down since the ex-champion had come to town, in prime condition and showing a rapid return to form at his training-quarters. Seven to five they stood now in favor of the champion, who was fresh from ten-round victories in the East. The sympathy was, perhaps, in

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favor of the local contender; but the hoodoo of defeat prevailed in financial transactions.

"On past form, if he has regained it," said the sporting press, "Eddie Haynes should recover his crown. But 'they never come back' is an old ring proverb."

Only Benny Hunter came out hopefully for the ex-champion, quietly backing his opinion in early betting-odds, whereby he got on the short end at two to one—at the risk of a sad kink in his finances, present and future.

The film-men began to fuss over their machines. The reporters turned to their telegraphers; the star writers shifted in their seats. Talk buzzed in the arena like the hum of a mighty hive.

"Get through," said Benny Hunter to his aide, who was to report the fight by rounds. "They're coming in."

Cheers rattled back from the sides of the arena as Al Renny, confident and smiling, came down the aisles, surrounded by his knot of corner-men.

"The champion entered the ring at 3.30," clicked the telegraphers.

Renny came lightly through the ropes, bowing to the cheering that rose in another spontaneous roar as Haynes made his appearance. The camera-men prepared to get into the ring. Bill Gordon, the veteran announcer, looking like an amiable sea-lion, clambered up; and Ted Delaney, the referee, snug in a natty Norfolk suit, brisk and business-like, joined the principals.

The inevitable challengers made their bows under the charge of Gordon, and the spectators made their ringside bets.

"Spider's behind Haynes," went the word, as the famous ex-pugilist busied himself with his preparations.

"What's the betting he don't last fifteen rounds?"

"Three to one Renny don't knock him out."

"You're on!"

" 'Ere's your program! Full account of the fighters, pikchers an' records."

"H'ants, zeenut, p'nuts, popcorn, chewin'-gum *an'* candy!"

The keys of the telegraphers clicked busily again. A sudden, tense silence fell on the crowd. Gordon held the middle of the ring, a combatant on either side, his great paw held aloft for attention.

There was a marked difference between the men. Both were tanned, clear-eyed, at ease. Renny was stocky of build, deep-chested, short-limbed, suggesting a much heavier poundage than the hundred and thirty-five he had weighed in at noon. He looked like the rough model of some sculptor, unfinished but full of hinted agility and strength.

Haynes was the finished product, the ideal statue. Slightly taller than his opponent, rangier of limb, he showed no sign of spareness, no strain of hard training. His muscles were less evident, though the slightest movement showed them rippling under the golden satin of his skin. His body sloped in a triangle from shoulder-edges to hips; his curving thighs and lower legs were shapely in their strength. He looked straight ahead of him, smiling slightly, deaf to Gordon's rambling announcement, seeing a hillside set with pines, and the figure of a girl whose eyes he knew were gazing at him.

"Let 'er go!" barked Gordon.

The crowd seemed to exhale one deep universal breath as the fighters faced each other and perfunctorily palmed their right gloves, while the expert seconds deftly cleared the corners.

A boy found Hopworth in his seat by the press-box.

"Telegram for Eddie Haynes," he announced, his eyes bulging at the ring.

Hopworth signed the slip, deliberately opened the envelope, read the message and slipped it into his pocket.

"Good-luck stuff," he said to an inquisitive newspaperman.

"Gee, I hope Eddie wins," said the messenger. "Kin I stay, mister?"

"If you don't lose your job," said Hopworth; and the boy ducked under the railing of the box, unprotested.

"BOTH men sparred cautiously for an opening," dictated the round-by-round reporters to their operators.

Haynes was the more cautious of the two. Renny had improved in boxing he knew, while he lacked sufficient practise.

Renny had the confidence of the championship and, bigger factor still, the knowledge of previous victory. He would have the champion's edge on the decision, but he was not at all sure of outpointing his man. So they led and countered and clinched with light exchanges till the third gong sounded and the crowd commenced to chafe and call for action.

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"Cut out the exhibition!"

"Aw, g'wan an' fight!"

There was a smart exchange; blows were delivered too swiftly to follow; and the men fell into a clinch. Renny's left eyebrow was swelling like a penthouse roof, and a scarlet blotch showed where his glove had landed on Haynes' stomach.

Eddie was smiling. He could stand the gaff there now. It had been a weak point the last time. He felt as if he had a dynamo storing up power within him. He was supremely conscious of strength as he set his arms against the champion's, warding off attempted jolts.

"Think ye're goin' to come back?" said Renny derisively. "It ain't in the book, ye poor boob!"

Haynes smiled at him as they broke, deftly ducking a haymaker and countering low on the ribs.

Their blood was up now. The blows were vicious and, as they warmed to the sting of the impacts and the quickened flow in their veins, they were willing to trade punches and take chances.

They came to a sudden rally, heads low, arms swinging home with thuds that brought yelps of delight from the seats. Renny's right struck snakily upward and Haynes' head rocked; but the force was spent by the quick give of the supple neck, and he equalized matters by a smash to the mouth that split the lips and brought a ghastly grin to the surface.

"What did I tell you?" said Benny Hunter to a confrère. "This is going to be some fight!"

Hunter's opinion was echoed generally as round after round passed by, the fighting growing fiercer, more open, without any distinct advantage between the men. The crowd sat leaning forward, hands on knees, silent save for little jerky ejaculations, every male of them intent upon the earliest of sports, rapt in a primeval impulse—watching a fight.

A late-comer, seeing the two figures alertly moving in the afternoon sun, their skins wet with perspiration, blood-smears on both, their shadows exaggerating the swift action of their owners, would have called the fight even; but the wise ones still waited for the challenger to blow up, for a decisive blow to the body from Renny to end the combat, though for the past five rounds the last sentence clicked over the keys was—"Haynes, a shade."

Haynes fought easily, coolly. He was sure of his reserves and sure of his lead, though not certain of the referee's idea of the matter. He jabbed steadily to the head, getting in a double-hander now and then, watching ever for his chance to whip over his famous punch.

Renny pounded away at Haynes' body, conscious of being outpointed. He worked with his right, holding his left for leads, unwilling to lower his guard and give an opening for the dangerous right cross.

The champion fought with head lowered, both arms angled before his crouching body, his eyes watching over his gloves.

At the close of the fourteenth round there was a consultation in the champion's corner. Money was at stake on the fight not lasting over the fifteenth.

"He's going to bring it to you," said Spider to Haynes. "He'll bull it. Look out for the rough stuff. You've got him so far. His bellows are bad. Keep prodding his dial. You're—— There you go!"

The gong clanged. Haynes gave way before the savage attack of Renny, eager to close matters. The champion threw his weight at Haynes like a battering-ram and forced Eddie to the ropes, sinking his head low, flailing with both hands as the barrier hampered his man. The crowd had found its voice now. Half of them were on their feet, shouting inarticulately, parodying the thudding blows of the champion.

"Wind him up, Al!"

"Carry it to him!"

"He's got him going! Good old Al!"

The referee called sharply to Renny.

"Cut out that butting! Cut it out, I say."

RENNY'S attack relaxed for a second and Haynes fought him back viciously to the center of the ring. Boxing was forgotten, discretion flung to the winds as they gave blow for blow, standing close with bent heads touching, hammering in smash after smash.

The bell found them still infighting, unwilling to part, thrust away at last by the referee.

The sixteenth round brought Renny desperate from his corner. He felt his crown slipping. They rushed to a clinch, their shadows, grown long in the afternoon rays, wierdly burlesquing the actions of their owners. Each had his head tucked close to

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a slippery shoulder, straining, swaying for a jolt to the body or the jaw. The referee danced alertly about them.

Renny watched the official's shadow and maneuvered to get Delaney directly behind him. He worked his right arm nearly free and snapped at Haynes one of the vile epithets of the unwritten vocabulary of the ring. Eddie replied with a swing to the side of the jaw; and the champion, seizing his opportunity, sent his right like a piston, low to the groin.

Haynes gasped, wrapped his arms automatically about his face and sank to his knees, his face gray with agony. The roar of the crowd seemed beating him down. His arms drooped.

"Foul!" he cried faintly as all his body wilted till his head touched the canvas between his gloves.

There was a shout of protest from the Spider, a roar from Renny's corner, a conference in the press-boxes. None seemed certain where the blow had landed. The referee, motioning Renny backward, swung his right arm in the count as the ringside shouted for the champion in a hoarse chant of unison.

The fierce, stabbing pain kept Haynes from oblivion. He heard the steady count with apathy. Every nerve cried for quittal, for rest. Yet at "Six!" habit brought him to one knee, while he wiped the cold sweat from his forehead. He saw Renny dimly, waiting with arms a-swing.

"Eight!—Nine!"

He got wearily to his feet with heavy arms set against the onslaught. They closed about Renny's as he clinched, locking them while he dragged with his weight. Renny tugged him back and forth, striving to get free, his corner yelling at him, the crowd shouting for an end.

The gong came at last and Haynes staggered to his chair.

"Fouled you?" asked Spider. "Where was it? Give me a chunk of ice—you!"

The spot ached and throbbed as it swelled. Temptation urged Haynes to quit. The bruise would show; he could claim the fight. Spider read his thoughts.

"Stick it out if you can, pal. You've got the edge yet. It's going to be tough to prove. Delaney didn't see it." Haynes realized the wisdom of the advice. He knew the skepticism of the public. A claim might give him the fight, but there would always be a doubt. He doubled over in a stab of sudden pain.

Hopworth looked about him and spied the messenger, who with flaming face was arguing with a bald-headed, fat-stomached sport three times his age.

"He fouled him, I tell yer!" he cried, tears rolling down his grimy face. "I seen it. Aw, wot t'ell!"

"Here, kid," said Hopworth. "Take this over to Spider, quick! Here's a dollar."

"From Tim," said the lad, reaching up the yellow slip to the second.

"Telegram for you, pal," said Spider. "Shall I read it?"

Haynes nodded.

I'm waiting for you, Eddie. Yours, win or lose.—MARION.

Hopworth had proved a worthy Mercury. Marion, blushingly handing in her message to the indifferent operator, could not have chosen a better moment for delivery.

"Read that again, will you?" said Haynes.

Spider obeyed.

His pain had vanished. The vision of the hillside rose before him. "Win or lose!" It would be win.

He was weaker than he thought, though his limbs responded to the call of his science as he sidestepped and ducked the vigorous attack. Renny was a gray shadow that dealt mysterious blows from an intangible body; but he grew stronger as he fought, parrying, retreating, avoiding issue till the gong clanged once again.

Spider, with subtle skill, massaged his head, slipping firm, probing fingers above the eyebrows, round the contour of the skull, pinching the base at the neck-vertebrae with a snap.

"How you comin', pal?" he asked.

"Fine," answered Haynes, his head clearing, a sense of vigor returning. "What's the round?"

"Eighteenth. Only three more, old boy."

"One more," said Haynes grimly.

They met in the center, Renny boring in. Haynes countered only with his left, keeping his right side palpably guarded, ducking and dodging lead after lead. A blow on Renny's swollen lips made the champion wince.

As he gave way, Haynes started to follow, seemed to slip or turn his right foot, and flung up his right arm as if for balance. With a grin Renny stepped in and swung straight for the side, careful to aim within

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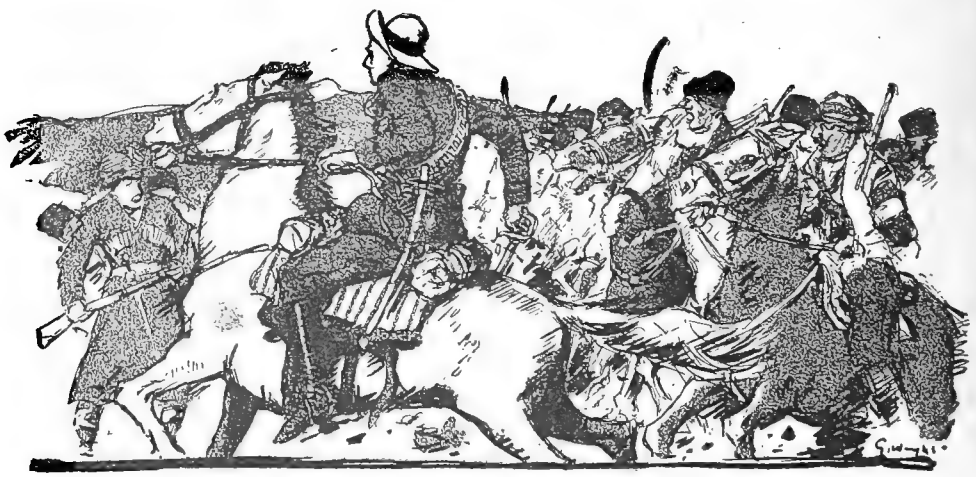
the rules, but knowing his blow would start the torture afresh and give him a chance for his haymaker, ready to start.

Haynes' rising arm stopped with the elbow on a level with his shoulder, the forearm slightly higher. He shifted his weight to his left foot; his body curved to one side as Renny's glove skidded from its slippery surface. His elbow dropped; the forearm curved back, then darted forward and across, straight to the mark. There was a dull *thwack!*—and Renny toppled sidewise, his arms swinging limp, and crashed to the canvas.

Haynes watched him for a second, then turned and walked toward his corner. The right cross had landed.

Hopworth, sighing relief at the breaking of the tension, was conscious of a diminutive figure at his side, pounding excitedly on his thigh, face crimson with happy excitement.

"They don't come back, huh!" cried the boy. "I guess they don't come back!"



King Dick

A Tale of Dick Anthony of Arran

by

Talbot Mundy

LIKE diamonds, suspended from the dark blue-velvet dome of heaven, the stars that are Persia's own, appeared to sway above the Elburz Mountains—above virgin forests, nearly trackless—above a silver stream that bubbled from a natural amphitheater between the tree-fringed summits of twin peaks, to wind and sing and tinkle down seven thousand feet, to the Caspian below.

Hushed like the hours when the dawn of history was being planned, many more than a thousand men lay hidden amid the trees on every side; for where Russian gold and Russian promises have undermined, men hesitate before they come into the open. They lay by their arms and listened, breathing softly and missing not one word of a monologue that rang, clear-worded, through the night.

Dick Anthony of Arran—Scots gentleman, with barely a spare shirt to his name, but with a heart that was unafraid—stood out alone where the spring splashed. One hand rested on a rock that looked not very

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much unlike a rough-hewn throne, and in the other was a jeweled claymore that had been forged in a forgotten century, but whose blade was bright as silver.

He was speaking fluent Persian in a voice that carried with no apparent effort to the farthest limits of the amphitheater. He could see no more than shadow just beyond the pale ring of the moonbeams, and hear no more than, now and then, the clash of steel on steel when some one moved; but the moon just rising over the encircling fringe of trees silhouetted him—shone like wet silver on his red hair—even exaggerated the free angle of his chin and neck. He looked neat, lean and active—a man to lead and be obeyed.

Once, when he spoke of the knout he had seen Cossacks use on quivering Persian shoulders, he betrayed his own emotion and the way it moved him, for he swung the claymore high above his head and held it there, humming. Then, in an instant, the darkness was alive with a desire to shout—with wrath, hard-held—with tension, as older men restrained younger from leaping to their feet.

Then, too, a grizzly, tremendous man with one arm in a sling rose out of darkness from behind Dick and stood ready for emergencies, like Little John attendant on Robin Hood.

"Lie down again, Andry!" he ordered; and Andry Macdougal, who looked big enough to swallow him, grinned like a gargoyle and obeyed.

The unseen, undisciplined horde behind the shadows took its cue; the example was infectious, as intended, and once more the night breathed steadily.

"So, this I know surely," Dick concluded. "Russia is deliberately driving you to outlawry, to excuse the presence of Cossacks on this side of the border. I have seen the Cossacks stirring trouble; and the veriest fool could understand how trouble means more Cossacks, and again more trouble, until a Russian army is encamped on Persian soil. And, when that army is once here, treaties and conventions will be torn up and the very name of Perisa will be part of her forgotten history. I would be less than man, did I not sympathize with Persia—more than brute—cur, were I Russia's friend! But—whatever my personal opinions—and you know them—I am *first always* a British officer, and bound by the restrictions that implies. Now, let your head-man speak."

Proof, if it were wanted, that Dick Anthony must not be reckoned in the run of ordinary men, is that these mountain outlaws had heard him uninterrupted to a finish; for Persia is a land of wordy talk—a land where poetry was born, away back in the womb of ages, to grow into a cult of utterly impractical ideas—a land where men talk all at once and weave word-spells to heal treason.

Now, as he sat down on the rock and looked—at his ease on it—more dignified than ever, a graybeard passed his rifle to another man and stepped out from the shadow of a mountain-oak to answer him. The old man looked like a Druid priest about to sacrifice to the forest gods—savage—solemn—and a-tremble with dramatic fervor, he strode out into the circle of moonlight, as an actor makes for the middle of the stage, fully aware of its advantage.

"In the name of Allah," he began, bowing low to Dick, but gathering all attention to himself with a gesture that was studied, but seemed natural, "I speak for three thousand men of Iran, in these mountains—all loyal men—who hide in fear of Russia. God is my witness that our homes are cinders. Our families — our children — brothers — wives—are in Russian-guarded jails, or dead, or ravished. Our lives are worth one Cossack cartridge each, did we dare venture to the plains. On those plains there are two hundred thousand others—one with us at heart—who dare not make one cause with us because Russian guile and threats and bribery have rotted patriotic hearts. They hesitate—trusting nobody, and us least of all because—*we have no man to lead us!*"

"I have said I am a British officer," Dick reminded him. There was something in his voice that might have hinted at regret, but there was no least suggestion of a thought of compromise. "I can help. I can carry an account to London. I can advise you. And I can stir public opinion until Great Britain for very shame must act on your behalf. But I can not lead you."

"Prince!" said the old man, giving Dick a title that is only courteous, but bowing low to emphasize it. "We are over-weary of the actions and unkept promises of your Faranghistan! Russia in the North cheats, steals, and lies to hide her villainy; but England is not very far behind her in the South!

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Russia lends money and gives bribes; England buys oil-fields. Move against move, England and Russia go about to swallow Iran!

"Prince—most noble prince—we, who love Iran more than man loves woman, hope to make their meal a poisoned one! If they see the poison, and are warned and do not swallow—good! But—if they swallow—then the venom we will brew shall turn their stomachs so that they disgorge again! Heart and soul—body and brains—to the end, whatever that may be—*they* are for themselves. *We*, most noble prince—until the last man dies, or is flogged to death—are for Iran! Our cause is just—our invitation personal to you. We do no dishonor to the man we ask to lead us!"

Dick Anthony sat still and laughed. It was a strange, far-reaching laugh, unmusical as the devil, made up of three separate inharmonies, and it had a weird effect as it went ringing through the night. Whatever it might mean—and Dick was not too often given to explaining things—it made men's backbones tingle. It stirred the waking fire in Usbeg Ali now, and the Afghan rose out of a shadow.

"Lead them, sahib! Lead them!" he urged. "I am no braggart—no light-o'-promise—I am a man whom seven more have followed up and down the world that they might see what I can show them! And by the blood of God I say, lead on, *bahadur!* I have found them and shown them a leader to whom I—I, Usbeg Ali—bow! These men lack nothing but a leader such as thou art, and their cause is just!"

Andry Macdougal, not quite unjealous of the Afghan, had risen too out of his shadow and stood, in all the pride of good Scots service, where he could have reached and ripped apart the limbs of an intruder at a sign from Dick. He caught Dick's eye.

"Lead on, Macduff!" he quoted grimly.

The old Persian, who knew only Persian, sensed and understood. It seemed good to him to add Persian persuasion to the urging of the other two.

"Lead us against Russia! Great Britain fears lest Russia take the biggest bite. Defeat and drive out Russia, and Great Britain will evacuate! Lead us against Russia, noble Prince, and out of gratitude such as only patriots can feel we will heap on you riches, and far greater honors than the right to call yourself a British officer!"

"There *is* no greater honor," answered Dick.

"Then riches—power——"

"*Halt!*" rang a sudden order through the stillness; and the same instant the whole night became alive with the click of breech-bolts. Then silence—taut and fearful—followed. Not a man moved.

"IDIOT!" hissed Usbeg Ali Khan, for fear and he were not associates. The old Persian trembled in his grip. "Why speak to him of riches? Brother-of-a-buzzard! Hast thou not learned to know a sahib—a true sahib? Have I not told thee, over and over until my tongue is dry, that he is the Great Iskander come to life again? Are riches fit bait for such an one? Father-of-a-litter! Show him thy poverty and he may champion thy cause—talk to him of riches and he will turn his back on thee! I know *his* kind!"

"Silence!" ordered Dick, for he was listening, and the Afghan's voice was loud enough to distract attention. Unconsciously—but because the strength to do it lay in him and would come out, he had taken absolute command already; the next five minutes were to prove it, but the Afghan recognized it now and Andry was not far behind him. Both men grinned delightedly; but Usbeg Ali clapped a hand to his mouth, and satisfied the Persian that he dared not disobey, had he wanted to.

Then a new sound broke into the silence. A ragged outlaw, whose chief claim to notice was a rifle and a bandoleer, came stumbling over the stones by the little water-course, running into the moonlight like a shadow shot out of the night.

"A woman!" he panted. "Two women—and two Cossacks—four in all! Our outpost made them prisoners. They demand speech with Dee-k-Anthonee!"

He spoke to the head-man; but the head-man turned to Dick. And Dick, who had heard every word of it, ignored the head-man altogether. He was furious. Well he knew who was the only woman who would dare to track him through Elburz Mountain gorges to the haunt of Russia's enemies. The other could only be her maid. He had turned his back on the Princess Olga Karageorgovich at the head of a pass, amid Russian dead and wounded, fifty miles away, and he had thought every mile of the intervening climb worth while, because it

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was that much more trackless distance between him and her.

"Tell them they may go to——" he began.

But the shadows burst to pieces and the darkness shook, as a thousand outlaws interrupted him and voiced one judgment.

"Stone them! Shoot them! Burn them alive! They are Russians—they come to win him over—take and burn them! Treat them as the Cossacks treated ours!"

In a world that is full of all the kinds of horror there is nothing that can match that blood-cry of a masterless mob, hungry for vengeance. It is worse than the yell of a looting army—worse than the din of battle or the shriek of women—worse than anything. So—more than any other thing there is on earth—it brings the greatness of a grown man to the surface.

"Silence!" thundered Dick, and his voice was like the sudden crashing of the elements.

The din of savagery died away and ceased. The night was still again.

"Weigh my words well! Ye say ye are patriots and men of honor. I am a man of honor! Ye say ye have a cause worth fighting for. Ye ask me to lend ear to it. Yet, what is this shouting?"

He paused, but not for an answer, and none dared give him any. He had forgotten Andry and Usbeg Ali Khan who stood behind him with seven others. He was only aware of what he did not mean to tolerate, and of his own spirit that bade him dare a thousand men.

"If I lead, I will lead men, not wolves! If ye are like the Cossacks—are but violators of defenseless women—liars—cowards—dogs, without mercy or respect—then count me your enemy and begin the fighting now!"

His defiance rang to the farthest limits of the amphitheater, but not a murmur answered him. He had no notion how he looked, bare-headed in the moonlight; nor did he know what Usbeg Ali had told behind his back, about his being Alexander of Macedon come to life again. He knew nothing, in that minute, except that he stood and faced a thousand in a ring of pale light beyond which he could not see. But they could see; and they had heard; and they had never seen nor heard the like of him. Usbeg Ali Khan—artist in his own way, as well as gentleman adventurer—chose just that second to insert his weight into the scale.

"Hear him!" he shouted. "Hear one man dare a thousand, and yet none answer him! Was it thus with you before he came? Choose ye, men of Iran!"

He stepped out to where the moon shone brightest—yet far enough away from Dick to be out of reach of that two-edged sword—and there was laughter in his voice—the laughter that convinces by its very confidence.

"Choose ye!" he mocked. "Is this cause fit for a Dee-k-Anthonee to champion? Or are ye brothers of the Russian bear—liars and murderers? Choose carefully! Take time and much thought for the choosing! Choose ye well!"

Dick did not move toward him—did not look at him—did not speak for the moment; yet Usbeg Ali Khan became aware that he had stirred displeasure, and another sentence he had ready died in his black beard.

"You might write down the rest of it," suggested Dick, in hard King's English, and Andry, reaching out a huge arm, drew Usbeg Ali to him.

"Wull ye no learn?" he demanded. "Oor business—mine an' yours—is to fecht like twa de'ils when Mr. Dicky gies the word, keepin' verra mum meanwhiles. Na-na! Pit y'r pistols doon!"

The Afghan found himself enveloped by an arm that was tough as a wire hawser, and he was crushed until the desire to defend his dignity oozed out of him; nor did he make the mistake of shouting to his seven to rescue him; injured arm or not, he knew that the huge Scotsman could have crushed him dead while the seven hesitated.

Dick saw nothing of the by-play—heard no word of it. He was rapt—intent—sensing the wordless change that was taking place amid the trees. The mob that had so long been weary of its lawlessness was beginning to have one mind and to be aware of it. For the first time it faced a man whose voice rang true—who dared dictate to it—who offered it no compromise, and only two alternatives—obey or fight!

There was a rustling amid the trees, that trespassed on the silence and then grew to whispering; and there was a thrill, such as only born leadership can stir, that went outward through the crowd in rings, invisible, inaudible, but tangible as the weather.

"Prince!" said the old head-man, bowing very low. "It is time, now, to give orders!"

But Dick had not had his answer yet, and

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he chose to have it, straight from the many-minded mob, before he gave his own.

"Ye take a long while choosing between right and wrong!" he taunted them.

He did not want their leadership and did not care to have it thrust upon him. But the first clear article of his iron creed was that always—under any circumstances—anywhere—a man may be a gentleman; and so, he chose to try to save the life of a woman he detested. He did not know that they could have denied him nothing that he asked for, standing that way, with the moonlight streaming over him, and the claymore, like a strip of shimmering silver, in his hand.

"Are we friends or enemies?" he mocked.

And then the whispering swelled to words, and the words gathered like a thunderstorm until the wooded hollow roared and heaven echoed it.

"*Zindabad!*" yelled somebody with leather lungs. From opposite another yell answered him—then ten more—then a hundred. Then the timber on the hillsides shook as the whole crowd roared together and Dick Anthony received his answer.

"*Zindabad Dee-k-Anthonee Shah!*—Long live King Dick Anthony!"

An older man with more experience, who did not want to be their leader, would have acted otherwise; but Dick had in mind the safety of two women, and as usual no thought of his own advantage. Up went that strange, bright sword of his, humming again in the moon-rays.

"Silence!" he thundered, and instantly the whole glade seemed to cease to breathe.

Never had there been another man whom all, at once, desired to hear and to obey. They gasped amazement at their own obedience and then grew still again.

"Send men to bring those women in!" he ordered. "In my name—on my responsibility—let them be promised honorable treatment! Send the Cossacks back about their business. Promise them, in my name, that they shall not be molested until they reach the Russian lines. Tell the women they shall have a bigger, more efficient escort to take them back again!"

They waited, thinking there was more to come, or perhaps an explanation. But Dick was not given to explaining things or wasting words.

"It is an order!" he said, and took his seat on the rock again to await obedience.

Then the glades awoke to the birth of discipline. Men who had never yet obeyed, unless they were forced with a whip or bribed, raced to be first to carry out the order, and it needed instant action to prevent a mad, undignified stampede.

USBEG ALI KHAN—veteran of fifty fights—was the man who touched the right cord and started order redeveloping from chaos. He beckoned his seven, and all eight of them took stand in the center of the patch of light.

"*Zindabad Dee-k-Anthonee Shah!*" they yelled with swords aloft; and the crowd took up the yell, until the mountain-tops reverberated. Calling him king reminded them that they were conferring an honor; and men who do that do it in order, decently. They began to form up—still thundering their ovation.

They were ready to do more than merely call him king. Unwittingly, he had done the one thing likely to appeal straight to their resentful hearts. He had meant, when he ordered the Cossacks sent away, to remove temptation—what he knew would be temptation to repay Russian treatment of prisoners in kind. To them, though, he seemed to have defied Russia. To promise an outlaw escort to take the women back again was humor—grim humor, of the kind they were willing to ram home.

"*Zindabad Dee-k-Anthonee Shah!*" they roared; and the woods and the hills were shaking to the thunder when a dozen men escorted two tired horses through the boulder-strewn gap, along the singing stream, into the amphitheater. On each horse sat a woman, astride on a Cossack saddle. Each was blindfolded, for that is outlaw custom the wide world over—designed far more to emphasize outlaw majesty than for the purpose of maintaining secrecy. The rear woman of the two rode heavily—despondently—dead weary and afraid; but she in front had a high chin, and even the cloth that had been thrown over her head was made to lend her added grace and the hint of coquetry, with an art that is born in some women.

Quietness shut down on them as they were led in front of Dick, and halted facing him.

"Why are they blindfolded?" he asked. "Are ye afraid of them?"

Unordered—uninvited—the Princess Olga Karageorgovich raised both hands and untied the cloth that hid her face.

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"So, it is '*Zindabad Anthony Shah!*' already?" she said smiling. And, tired though she must have been, her smile was a thing to wonder at—to dare death for, if a man were built that way. "Oh Richard, oh my king—what did I tell you long ago in Egypt? Did I not offer you a kingdom then? Did I not say you were born for one? And now—after you have run away three times—what are you? Not Dick Anthony of Arran any longer, but of Persia!"

"Of Arran!" answered Dick; and she laughed at him with a musical tinkling laugh that was not very much unlike a peal of silver bells.

"Dick Anthony of Arran escaped to sea—was drowned—and is forgotten!" she answered. "He whom the gods would make a king can never escape a throne! Long ago I told you that the world was at your feet if only you would look—now you are made to look! But I weary, *mon sire*, of this high saddle and this altogether miserable horse—yet I have no cavalier, and my escort was sent galloping away at your majesty's express command!"

Whether she was mocking him or not—and nobody could ever be certain of her mood—she was entitled to the outward forms of courtesy that ought to be the symbols of a man's own self-respect. Dick well knew she could spring from the saddle unassisted. She was tired, but her willowy, lithe form—her every least movement—betrayed cat-like strength as well as health and youth. She waited, though, until he walked up to her stirrup, and she let him lift her to the ground. Perhaps she lingered just a little longer in his arms than she need have done, for he made an excuse to turn away from her.

"Help the maid down, Andry!" he ordered; and he knew perfectly well, without looking, that Andry was in the act of doing it.

The maid had not had courage enough left in her to pull the cloth from her head; she had sat the horse in a state of dismal lethargy, preferring not to see the next horror that the night would yield. She toppled over into Andry's arm when he touched her, and it was he who withdrew the blindfold. Then she screamed, for Andry was not beautiful.

"Ugh! *Le diable! Aie-ee! Encore le monstre—le cannibale écossais!*"

But she lay still enough in Andry's huge, encircling arm and seemed glad enough to have him carry her. He laid her on his own coat where a deep black shadow fell beyond the ring of moonlight.

"There now, lassie!" he consoled her. "There's naethin' in the worrrld can harrrm ye, f'r I'm watchin' oot! Lie still an' rest ye awhile!

"*C'est l'enfer!*" she murmured. "*Regardez seulement les diables! Voyez leur prince! Mon dieu!*"

But she did not scream any more nor make any effort to escape him. And Andry, who knew no French at all, was quite content to let her murmur what she pleased; besides, he had one eye on Dick again.

Dick stood facing the Princess with an expression on his face that would have baffled an arch-inquisitor; only Andry, who had known him from a boy, could read it.

"Puir lassie!" Andry commented. "She's a bad ane—an' he's a good ane! 'Tis verra peetiful!"

"I have a word for your private ear," said the Princess, "and I have ridden far and hard to tell it you. Will you speak to me alone?"

She glanced round at the shadowy trees between whose boles other shadows moved.

"No," said Dick. And she threw her head back—looked straight into his eyes—and laughed at him deliciously.

"Monsieur the king of bandits!" she said, pointing an accusing finger. "You must make yourself King of Persia now, or hang! I am here to tell you how to do one, and to avoid the other!"

THE ring of blackness that hedged in the moonlight seemed to crowd closer and listen as Dick stared hard at her, and knew himself to stand at bay. Nobody but this one woman had ever yet made him feel helpless. Always, whatever shape they took, he had known himself able to dominate other situations. But how in thunder, he asked himself, could a man deal other than politely with a woman?

Yet he was beginning to bow to the inevitable—beginning to realize that there are limits to a woman's license. Even the watching mountain-men—all eyes for anything that might affect their destiny—detected indignation boiling underneath his outward calm. She saw the signs of dawning desperation and flinched; for a man with a jaw like his, and an eye as calm as his, is

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worse than loosed flood-water when the barrier of his grim reserve is down.

He offered her his rock-seat with the air of a gentleman conferring favors, and she chose there and then to prove up her judgment of his frame of mind. She made room for him beside her, and his manner as he drew back instantly brought a quick, delicious laugh from her; it sounded like a peal of fairy bells, ringing through the night.

She thought that for once, perhaps, he might be goaded into speaking first, and she waited; but he let her wait. He seemed able to wait forever, and presently she hurried to begin, for the silence was too one-sided in its unnerving effect. It gave her love for him too great opportunity to grow, just sitting there and looking at him, standing like a demi-god in the mysterious, dim light, unconscious of his poise and charm.

She wanted him furious—in a mood to take the bit between his teeth and dare whatever came of it—and herself enough in hand to guide him when he burst the bonds of self-restraint.

"*Monsieur le superbe!*" she called him. "*Monsieur le roi des bandits!*" She thought that mockery might help stir him into action. "You are going to need all your pride and resolution now—all your courage—all your brains."

"Meaning, I suppose," said Dick with perfect outward calm, "that you have invented a new game and hope to drag me into it. You'll fail!"

"*Mon sire,*" she laughed, "I can imagine you fighting with an ax! But never mind, I came for straight talking. This time the game is not mine; you are in the toils in spite of me and I am here to help you."

Her rock-seat was low and she had to look up at him. The moon, that outlined his neat figure and hinted at his iron strength, made her seem fragile, unimportant, desperate; she might have been a wisp of misery dropped and left there by the wind. It was not easy for her to seem jubilant—to try to take the upper hand of him and to pretend she held all trumps. She needed all her energy and skill to concentrate on Dick, and the eyes that peered at her through the night from every hand made her nervous.

"Your pack, *monsieur le roi des loups*, may be in your royal confidence," she mocked, "but is not in mine. I came to talk confidences. Will your majesty dismiss them, or shall we two adjourn elsewhere?"

But ridicule fell off Dick's broad shoulders and left him unaffected, just as threats only put him on his guard. Once on his guard, attempts to get him at a disadvantage made him adamant.

"I will have food brought you," he said stiffly, "and blankets if there are any to be had. You may sleep under that tree, and I will set a guard to see that you are not molested. One hour after dawn you and your maid go back to where you came from, with an escort big enough to deliver you safely at the other end. I have nothing to say to you. If you have anything to say to me you may say it here, and I will listen."

She flinched again; for in all her experience of him that was the first time he had ever shown his hand to her in advance, and now his promise proved as direct, blunt and uncompromising as his deeds had always been.

Well she knew that he would listen! He always had listened to the end, and then he had always acted with a suddenness that beggared speed. His manner now was unmistakable — judicial — stern — it branded him as an Anthony of Arran. She was not the only one who diagnosed it. Usbeg Ali Khan, watching through the dark with soldier eyes that missed nothing, recognized the attitude of grim conclusion and drew nearer, swearing into his black beard because the talk was not in Persian that he understood so much more readily. Then Andry, jealous as a faithful hound, came closer on the other hand and lay down in a shadow within reach. The Princess saw both men, and though she looked at Dick, her words were meant for all three.

"You are in a net, Monsieur Anthony of Persia!" She mocked him, and pointed an accusatory finger that was meant to impress the crowd, for she could act best when her case was most difficult and desperate. "No, not of Arran any longer, but of Persia now! You are a leopard who has changed his spots! A leopard trapped by Russia's secret government that has never yet let its victims go again! Trapped—but a royal leopard—one who can burst the trap by dint of brain and courage! I—who confess myself to you a member of that secret government—am here to help you. I am the little mouse who will gnaw the strands and let the leopard out! Refuse my aid and you are lost—tricked, made use of, thrown aside and damned!"

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"Quite a catalog of ills!" said Dick with the air of a man who did not believe a word she said.

"You will be hunted through these hills, *monsieur le roi des loups*, until the hunting is no longer profitable. When Northern Persia is at last Russia's, by reason of the presence of so many regiments, all brought down here, one at a time, to try to catch you, then some one of your own entourage will be bribed, most likely—with quite a little sum—and you will die by poison, or by a dagger in the dark."

Dick laughed at her.

"The hunting won't last long!" he said, and the mockery in his voice was real, where hers had been acted. "A man took a letter for me late last night. Great Britain takes a hand next!"

"Shall I tell you to whom the letter was, and what you wrote?" she asked.

He did not answer her. Suddenly the painstaking completeness of the net began to dawn upon him.

"You wrote to the British Minister at Teheran! You said——"

"Enough!" said Dick. "You intercepted it. What next?"

"It was a gentlemanly letter, *monsieur le roi*—a kingly letter—dignified! It did not mention me, who am responsible for your predicament because I chose you in the first place! A mean man, or a coward, would have blamed the woman just as poor old Adam did. Man that you are, you ignored me and demanded to stand trial yourself! I am glad, *mon sire*, that I got the letter, and not your Minister; for he is a mere diplomat and could not appreciate stark honesty!"

He did not answer. His thoughts were away and away, trying to reform themselves on a new plane on which the British flag did not appear and a man must fight for justice on his own account. She laughed as she watched his face, and the note grew softer, more seducing. But his lips grew stern and thin.

"Richard Anthony," she purred, "was drowned on the *Themistokles!* The Russian Government reported to the British Government that his body was recovered, and then sunk feet foremost by a passing Russian ship! Who is this man who poses now as Richard Anthony of Arran? Who but an impostor, eh?"

"*Jezebel!*" swore Andry from between set teeth; but Dick held out a hand and the big man crouched lower to the ground.

"Who but an impostor—*monsieur le roi des loups*—would send abroad such stories of his ancestry? Northern Persia is alive with rumors of this imitation Richard Anthony, and of his sword, and of a boast that he is Alexander come to life again to establish Islam throughout all the world! Do you suppose the British Minister in Teheran has not heard the whisperings? Should you apply to him, what could he do but hand you over to the Russian Government for trial and punishment? Is not this a 'Russian Sphere of Influence'? "

The shame of the thought that his name was gone from him—that he might have to fight to prove his very birthright—overwhelmed Dick for the moment. That name —Anthony of Arran—had meant more to him than a stranger could have guessed. He was nonplused—taken off his guard.

"There are others who know me—who can identify me!" he argued weakly.

"For instance—who?" She was mocking him again.

"Lancaster!"

"Lancaster met you less than a week ago on this shore of the Caspian! He knows you for a man who crossed the Caspian in a stolen Russian boat—who forthwith burned the boat—who headed straight for the mountains on stolen horses—yes, *mon sire*, stolen horses—who placed himself at the head of these bandits and attacked a Cossack regiment! *N'est-ce pas?* He knows you for a man who calls himself Richard Anthony of Arran. Has he any proof?"

Dick muttered to himself something that the Princess could not catch. He set his teeth; and in the darkness just behind him, Usbeg Ali Khan, the Afghan, shuddered. He had had no leave from Dick to send abroad those tales, nor had Dick known anything about them. Unknown to each other, and with different ends in view, he and the Princess had been furthering the same plan to force Dick into leadership of a rebellion, and now it looked as if the Afghan might be called on for an explanation. But —as he explained it after to his seven—the hand of Allah intervened and saved him. Dick blamed the Princess for all of it!

"Who—unless you—could have devised such deviltry?" demanded Dick. "Who but you could have devised it and then have had the impudence to come here and offer

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help? Who but you would dare risk my holding you prisoner until——"

"Do it!" she burst out, leaping to her feet so that Dick stepped backward to avoid her. "Richard—my king of bandits—my king of wolves—my king-to-be—do it! Make me your prisoner and all Persia—all the World, if you will—is yours!"

She stepped toward him with her arms outheld, and he took no more steps backward; but as she came very close to him she stopped. It needed more courage than even hers to fling her into Dick's arms then.

"I don't want the World," he said; and she watched his lips as if she expected something more. She watched for half a minute and the listening darkness throbbed, for the dumb play was now obvious. So he answered the unspoken question too.

"Or you, Princess," he added quietly.

"But *I* want *you*, Dick Anthony! The Okhrana has you in its grip, and I love you—I would die, if you die! Only I can or dare help free you! I got you into the trap but I can lead you out again! Already—Dick—already I have dared too much for my own safety, unless you listen to me!"

"Did I ever seek your acquaintance, or ask you once to interfere on my behalf?" asked Dick; and she ignored that thrust, since it was unanswerable.

"They will hunt you from place to place! They mean to let you gain strength enough to be a menace, but never to let you grow too strong. They will let you have arms and ammunition—they will leave them for you to capture! Even money! They want a good, obvious, demonstrable excuse for marching more Cossacks down across the border. Beat them at their own game, then! Grow too strong for them, Dick Anthony! Be King Dick, with a vengeance! Make me your prisoner—aye, make me! You and I—together, Dick—with my knowledge and your courage—with my secrets and your ability to lead—can win all Persia—all Asia—the World! Listen, man—don't answer yet—just listen!"

HE WAS listening. It was no habit of his to interrupt when the enemy's plans were being spread before him. The bursting desire to speak, that she sensed, came from Andry and Usbeg Ali Khan who wanted to jump up and urge him too. Dick's mind had been made up minutes ago. Why should he speak? He stood like a statue—silent, proud and grim.

"Let me prove myself to you!" she begged him. "You don't believe me. Let me teach you to trust me! Let me prove my pure good-will and my power to help you! Reward me afterward, or not, just as you please!"

Actress among artists — artist among actresses—she could even be humble when humility seemed suited to her part. She shaded the inflections of her voice and posed in subtle harmony with the strange, mysterious silence. There is nothing more magnetic than the silence of a thousand men; yet, instead of being affected by it, she used it to her own advantage as a background for her acting. Had she been Titania and he Oberon, her part could never have been better played.

"Dick, dear—I love you! I loved you back in the beginning, when we met in Egypt. I made the mistake of trying to make use of you because I wanted you great, as you deserve to be. Now turn the tables, Dick, and use me! You *make* me speak before these cattle—me who have ridden fifty miles through jungle to warn you! And yet I love you! I could forgive you anything! Dick! King Dick! I would die for you! I will die, if you die! I *have* risked life, and limb, and reputation for you—and even more than those three, Dick. You would never guess the fate in store for me, were the Okhrana to guess that I am playing false! Now, Dick, at this minute I am running the gravest risk a woman can run—offering to betray the Okhrana to you! Dick, dear—are you listening? Are you deaf? Are you insensible?"

"You're consistent!" Dick assured her. "Consistent and persistent! I admire your determination very much. I'm only sorry you've bent all your springs to capture me. I could applaud your efforts to capture some other man, but—not being in love—I—ah—have to—to decline to make you prisoner! Your escort will be ready for you one hour after dawn!"

"Dick! Listen to me!"

But he bowed to her with a dignity that granted her acknowledgment in full of all her charm, and backed away.

"Are we enemies?" she asked.

"I would not willingly be any woman's enemy."

"Then, thank God, I am your friend!" she answered, speaking very gently—acting

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with all the power in her; death or success were the only possible alternatives in the fight she had entered on. "Truly—truly I am sorry that I ever interfered with you—that I harmed you! May I not try to make amends? May I not help you now? For I *can* help if you will let me."

"There is only one thing you may do," said Dick.

"Name it! I will do anything!"

"This. Tell the British Minister in Teheran, over your own signature or by word of mouth in person, that I *am* Dick Anthony of Arran—that I did *not* drown on the *Themistokles*—that you were with me on that ship and know me well. Assure him—as you can truthfully if you care to—that I am the victim of your damned Russian secret-police—of the so-called Okhrana—and that I have done nothing of which a British officer need be ashamed. Ask him to allow me to surrender to him in Teheran and be heard in my own defense. You, and very nearly only you in Persia, can prove my identity and prove, too, how I come to be in this predicament. Will you do it?"

She hesitated. It was obvious. He had asked the last thing she expected; and her face, that could usually hide emotion or betray at will emotion that she did not feel, darkened as she fought with a desire to bargain with him. He watched her lose her self-mastery and then win it back again.

"Yes!" she said suddenly. And before she said it he knew well she was about to lie.

"Very well," he said, bowing punctiliously. "I shall make an opportunity to thank you—afterward. In the meantime, I will send you food. I hope you will sleep well. Fresh horses will be ready for you one hour after dawn!"

He turned on his heel, then, and strode into the shadow of the trees. Instantly he was surrounded by a hundred men—fierce, wide-eyed, hungry men—who wanted to know facts. The night awoke to the murmur of a thousand tongues, for if his fate rested in the balance, so lay theirs and they lacked his strong patience to await the outcome.

"What is it, prince? What said she? What is to be done with her? What news of the Cossacks? Was it truth—God's truth—that she is to be sent back unmolested?"

"If you think you are dealing with a liar," answered Dick in no mood to be argued with, "you had better choose yourselves another leader! Myself, I would spit on a leader who lied—I would not follow him one furlong!"

"Then prince—then thou art leader—leader indeed?"

"Yes," said Dick curtly.

No one word ever gave a thousand men more joy, nor set the tree-tops ringing to a yell of greater exultation.

"Hear him! We have heard him! He has promised! He has said!"

Out and out into the darkness, up the hillsides in ever widening rings, the news went out that Richard Anthony was king—chief—champion—their leader against Russia!

"*Zindabad*——!" yelled somebody with lungs like plates of brass.

"*Zindabad*——!" a hundred echoed him. And then like a salvo of artillery there crashed across the amphitheater "*Zindabad Dee-k-Anthonee Shah!*"

If the Princess or her maid could sleep under the looted blankets that were brought them, then they were sweethearts of the slumber-god; for the night became a noise through which silence broke occasionally for an instant to give contrast to the din. They lit watch-fires, for who cared now whether or not the Cossack outposts saw a red glow on the sky and marked the location down? They had a leader. They dared flout a Russian army! The watch-fires grew to bonfires, and they dragged whole trees to cast into the flames.

The cost of cartridges became a jest—a nightmare of the past. By bandoleersful the bullets whistled skyward, to fall where they listed, so be the noise was great enough. And when Dick asked them where they expected to find other cartridges, the old bowed head-man gave a true Persian answer.

"Prince—we obey in all things. Therefore, we look up for all things to our chief whom we obey!"

"Very well," said Dick. "Cease firing!"

It took a little while to let that order percolate; but one by one it reached them and they saw the wisdom of it. Then it was borne in on them that they had a leader who could think calmly, even in the minute of his elevation, and then they exulted on a new chord, howling to the night about his wisdom. That one brief order did more for him than a night of preaching could have done. He became Dee-k-Anthonee the Wise, and ever afterward his lightest words had weight with them.

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Andry's eyes met Usbeg Ali Khan's, and —soldiers both—they read in each other recognition of the crowd's new voice, pitched in the key in which the tune of discipline is played. They grinned, and Andry strode to where an English leather bag lay underneath a tree, guarded by Usbeg Ali's seven followers. He drew bagpipes out. They were Dick's but he did not care for that.

There is music that is sweeter than he made. There are tunes that are better suited to the ear of cities, and to those occasions when the calm, sweet thoughts of gentlefolk are uppermost. There are melodies more soothing to the savage breast. But there is neither instrument nor melody with half that power to knit a swarm of men in single purpose. To their savage, under-droned inharmony the chanter skirled, and screamed, and taunted Fear. The woods grew silent while the skirly, creepy music rose and fell, and the mountain-men looked sideways at one another to see whether the other fellow, too, had water in his eyes.

"Cock o' the North" is a foolish tune, and the words are mere nonsense, if you measure either by the school rule. But, like Yankee-doodle, and another tune or two, it can pluck at the heart-strings of a fighting man and send him roaring to be first in the van of a forlorn hope. It is basic, true heart-music when you try the marching test. The Persians listened to it, and then marched to it—round and round the tree-hid amphitheater, thundering mad Persian versions of the song, extemporized as the tune took hold of them.

Then Dick took a turn, and he was an expert, whereas Andry was just Scots piper. The crowd stood still again, as he strode out alone and the pipes wailed new thoughts to them. They listened now to the melancholy minor music that has helped make Scotia what she is, and—savage as Mother Asia could breed them and Russian tyranny could make—they needed no interpreter. They knew the notes of manhood yearning to be free—of bravery sobbing at defeat—of wild, free spirit defying tyranny, and of clan-comradeship defying odds.

And, presently, he left the measured age-old tunes behind and improvised, as Scotsmen love to do. He played his way into their hearts, then wove history and personality and pride into one wild epic and played it to them until they groaned for his sorrow—swore all in chorus for his wrongs —and wept at his bravery. Before the moon died and the utter darkness came to herald dawn, they loved him—they who had buried all but hate and had looked on him merely as a man to rally round.

When the darkness quivered at last, and the mountain-sides began to glitter with the morning tints; when Dick sat down again, and Andry stowed the pipes away, they looked to see again what kind of man this was who had won their allegiance forever in a night. Had they been dreaming? Were they really, truly pledged to obey one man at last and take the fight to Russia?

They pressed around him. And as they looked through a gap between two tree-tops a sun-ray lit on him—the first glittering advance-guard of another day—gilding his red hair and showing him in outline against the trunk of a great tree. He shook himself to throw off the burden of a sleepless night; and they knew that minute—they knew surely! They had not been dreaming —were not fooled! He stood before them—shook himself in front of them—held up his chin and eyed them—smiled—and then ordered them—a man!

"*Zindabad Dee-k-Anthonee Shah!*" they began to yell again; but he held his hand up and they stopped.

"Enough of that!" he said in Persian. "Enough of promises! Now for breakfast, and performances!"

They brought him the best they had to eat, and at his orders fed the Princess and her maid; wonder of wonders, they obeyed him to the letter and showed both women the strictest courtesy. Then, as Dick had promised, exactly one hour after dawn the Princess and her maid set off on their return journey surrounded by an escort of fifty mounted-men—every single mounted-man, that was, who owned Dick as his chief.

"Will he not come and say good-by to me?" the Princess asked.

"No!" they assured her. "Forward!"

"*Nichevo!*" she answered. "It does not matter! I will help him first, and he will thank me afterward!"

A man rode back to report that little speech of hers to Dick.

"Do you believe her promises?" asked Dick.

"In the name of Allah, no! I believe nothing that a Russian says!"

"Then ride on—hold your tongue—and

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do your duty!" answered Dick, turning at once to Usbeg Ali Khan and dismissing the Princess for the time being from his memory.

II

THE Okhrana — Russia's secret bane as well as secret-service—is vile from the inside outward. Cancers inside it prey on its growing strength, just as it preys on Russia; and nowhere, where the Russian tongue is understood, is there any freedom from its lies, and subterfuge, and greed, and infamy.

While Dick Anthony, many a mile away amid the tree-clad Elburz Mountains, was trying to reject a leadership he had not sought, a Cossack guard paced up and down outside a dingy little house in Astrabad. He marched like a machine—thirty paces one way, and right about turn—thirty paces the other way, and right about turn—indifferent — unintelligent — obedient. Inside the house, in a little up-stairs room, two gentlemen in neatly fitting uniforms discussed plans, for which he and his fraternity were to furnish the dumb motive-power.

"So we've got him at last!" said the older of the two, who might have been an accredited diplomat, he looked so distinguished and innocuous. "He's rounded-up and harnessed. All he needs is plenty of whip and work!"

"The difficulty I see," said his *vis-a-vis*, adjusting his spectacles and fingering the long white scar down one side of his face, "is that he has already killed too many Cossacks. The next regiment sent against him is likely to get out of hand and kill *him*. Then where's your beautiful brigand?"

"Never fear!" said the first man. "My orders have been given and are understood. Should anything of that kind happen, the whole regiment, including officers, will go to do jail-guard duty in Siberia. They know that promise will be kept! Anthony won't be killed until I give the word!"

"Well—as long as he's alive, and at large in the Elburz range, he's a perfectly good excuse, of course, for sending for more Cossacks. Persia can't object. England can't object. Nobody can. He's a brigand, and under the treaty we've a right to proceed against him."

"That's not all of it," the other man answered. "We're in better luck than we expected. Details have just come in over the wire. Anthony, it seems, has an uncle who hates the sight of him. Almost the minute we sent word that Anthony's body had been picked up at sea and identified by papers in one of the pockets, this uncle applied to the courts for leave to administer the estate. Anthony is now removed from the British Army list—officially dead—and buried!"

"Well?"

"Sooner or later—and probably very soon —Anthony will send a message to the British——"

He was interrupted by a clatter of hoofs below and a sharp challenge that was answered just as sharply. A pass-word was given in a low voice, and a moment later both men listened to the sound of heavy footsteps clambering the narrow stairs. A resounding thump on the door was followed by the appearance of a very dusty Cossack who saluted and presented a letter to the older of the two men.

"Very well," he nodded, and the Cossack started for the stairs again.

Both men listened until they heard his steps on the threshold and then the stamping of his horse as he mounted.

"Here it is!" said the older man, tapping the letter with his finger, and smiling as if there were a check inside it. "A letter from Richard Anthony to the British Minister at Teheran! What did I tell you?"

He laid the letter on the table and rubbed his hands together delightedly.

"Our little Princess is managing famously! See her initials in the corner of the envelope? Never knew such a woman for putting her trademark on her handiwork! Thinks it will get her credit, I suppose! Now—I dare bet you I can tell you nearly word for word what's in that letter!"

"Never mind! I won't bet! Open it and read!"

The senior picked up the letter again and drew out two closely written pages. The handwriting was as clear and dignified as the words; there was not a blot nor an erasure from start to finish, nor a sentence that could have two meanings. The man chuckled as he read.

"Could have told you every word of it! Claims he is Richard Anthony of Arran—officer in the Territorials—gives date of his appointment—claims to be the victim of Russian spies and secret-police—gives his version of the incident at Baku—and winds

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up by demanding his right to surrender to the Minister at Teheran and be heard in his own defense. Couldn't be better! Couldn't be better! Now—it may surprise you—but I'm going to forward this letter at once to the British Minister!"

"But why? What good would that do? Aren't things difficult enough already?"

"Too difficult! We want to make them easy! You see, my friend, it's quite a few days since we notified the Minister that a man masquerading as Richard Anthony, and claiming to be a British officer, was telling fabulous tales about his sword and his ancestry and stirring rebellion in the Elburz range. The Minister wired London. London wired back that the real Richard Anthony is dead, having had that information by wire from us. So the Minister notified us duly that this man must be an impostor, and invited us to hurry up and catch him! Now—this letter from Anthony, twice opened and sealed up again but sent on straight to the Minister to whom it is directed, will look like awfully good faith on our part. He probably won't answer it; but if he does he will probably advise Anthony to surrender to us. Whatever he does, we wire for two more regiments of Cossacks! Understand that much?"

"Yes," said the man with the scar.

"Very well. How about Lancaster? What is he doing?"

"Sending cablegrams in code."

"Have we a copy of the code?"

"Surely. Every telegram he has sent, and every answer received by him, has been decoded and copied. Some of his telegrams have been—er—edited, to give them a clearer meaning. Here are all the copies. Read this one—this is Lancaster's own—no need to edit it—see where he assures them that Anthony can make Persia too hot to hold us? Read this one—no, this one asking for money, arms and ammunition for Anthony. Now read this answer—note how High Finance is interested—see? 'Where shall we send them, and by what route?' Pretty good, eh?"

The man who might have been a diplomat perused the little pile of copies carefully, penciling notes on the margins of some of them. Suddenly he looked up.

"Lancaster is in the way!" he snapped. "He's unnecessary! Put him in jail! Hurry him across the border! Siberia! Let Stromski do deputy for him. Stromski's got brains; Stromski's done this kind of thing before. But keep an eye on Stromski. In all probability Lancaster's safe in Teheran contains all his papers, and the key is certain to be in the man's pocket. See that Stromski gets the key—let Stromski study the whole case and get in touch with these financiers. Explain to him just how we stand with them, and tell him to wire them repeatedly to send money and ammunition; that will save us expense and commit them. Let some of the money reach Anthony and use the rest for bribing Persian officials, or for whatever other purpose I direct from time to time. . . ."

"But—suppose they send some one out to see Lancaster, or to relieve him? We can't forge more than his signature! He's one-eyed, and ugly, and recognizable more than a mile away!"

"Bah! Cross bridges when you reach them! Have you understood me? Then obey!"

The man with the scar and spectacles left the room at once and walked to the office where a force of government clerks were handling the telegraphic business. A weasel-faced man in the corner nodded to him.

"News for you, Stromski!" said the man in spectacles, passing through to an inner room.

The man addressed as Stromski tugged his military tunic straight, licked his lips, showed an eye-tooth in a momentary lapse of caution, and then allowed his facial expression to settle into blank uninterest. He looked at himself in a little pocket-mirror before he rose and followed.

"*Poul!*" said the man in spectacles, when Stromski closed the door behind him. The word is the commonest in the Persian language, and has almost reached the dignity of being slang.

"Whose money, and how much?" asked Stromski, taking the seat opposite.

Each man laid his elbows on the table and rested his face between his fists; the space between their faces was like the zone over which electric sparks are made to jump. The words were like little sharp explosions. Only the faces were expressionless.

"The money of half the financiers in Europe, and all we can get of it, my boy! You're to take these telegrams and this code-book and be Lancaster until further orders. Lancaster goes into the lock-up ten

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minutes from now, and thence over the border out of the way. Study the case thoroughly and get all these fool financiers to cable all the money they will. I may use 'some' of it to 'bribe Persian officials'. That mean anything to you?"

Stromski nodded.

"I'll find a puppet. He shall lend whatever money comes, for our joint account. The easiest thing in the world is to get Persians to borrow money at any rate at all. The hardest thing is to make them repay. But—here's where you and I come in, Stromski—a division of Cossacks is under my orders, with artillery. I'm sending for two more regiments and one battery at once. We'll lend the money at cent. per cent., and the Cossacks shall collect for us! Is that clear?"

"Perfectly," said Stromski.

Stromski screwed his face into a knot, and then unscrewed it. He seemed to be thinking hard.

"Haven't these financiers any check on Lancaster?" he asked. "Will they cable money just because I ask for it?"

"There are three men who check him up regularly—two in Teheran and one here. They are all in our pay. And there are two men in our pay at the other end as well! Have no qualms, Stromski—the way is paved!"

Stromski twisted up his face again and untwisted it by sections at a time. He seemed satisfied.

"So Anthony is to be forced to raise hell, eh? If he's half the man he's said to be, he may prove costly! He has killed fifty of our men already. It would look ridiculous to send an army corps against him yet—and, by regiments at a time, he may cost us half a dozen regiments, plus plunder!"

"Not much plunder left in this part of Persia!" said the man in spectacles, smiling reminiscently; and Stromski laughed.

"There won't be many Cossacks either, if Anthony turns out to be a real rebel!"

"*Nichevo!*" said the man in spectacles, shrugging his shoulders. "Are there no more where they came from?"

"Poor devils!" said Stromski. "So you and I get rich, eh?"

"If cent. per cent. can do it, yes! Keep in touch with me, move by move. I'm off now to see about Lancaster's arrest and to choose our puppet money-lender. If you're in doubt about anything, ask me; otherwise know nothing and, above all, be silent!"

Stromski nodded.

"Afternoon then, Stromski. I'll send you Lancaster's bunch of keys within an hour."

"Good afternoon!" said Stromski.

III

HE WAS a new Dick Anthony who turned to Usbeg Ali Khan when the Princess disappeared through the gap that led out of the amphitheater. He no longer lost time. He no longer dallied with responsibility—it was his—he had accepted it.

"Usbeg Ali Khan!" he said in a voice that reverberated.

"*Bahadur?*"

"I wish you to be second-in-command!"

The Afghan saluted him with dignity, but eyed Andry Macdougal sideways. Of Asia — deep-dyed, hard-bitten — he knew jealousy of old.

"Andry!" commanded Dick.

"Sir?"

"Salute Usbeg Ali Khan!"

The great, grim Scotsman swung a hand like a semaphore and did as he was told. The expression on his wrinkled face, as the freckles worked up and down, was enigmatic; if he felt surprised, he certainly contrived to hide it, but if he felt pleased he hid that, too.

"You're third. You know no Persian. Your value lies in your loyalty and your soldier training. If you could speak or understand Persian I would have made you second-in-command, but as it is I expect you to pick up a smattering of Persian if you can, and—er—always pay Usbeg Ali Khan the respect due to his position. No more talk about 'black men'! Do you understand?"

"Aye. I ken."

"I'm a dead man, Andry! They've stricken Dick Anthony from the list—taken his name away!"

"Man—Mr. Dicky—ye've only her bare word for it—mak' verra certain before ye leap at conclusions!"

"I've leaped!" said Dick. "She spoke the truth this time. I'm a dead man. I'm going to be the liveliest dead man Russia or any other country ever buried!"

"Aye, I believe ye!"

"As a dead man, they can't bring me to

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account! I'm officially dead and buried, Andry! I owe no fealty to any country, nor obedience to any human law! I'm dead—rotten by this time! The worms have got me! Do you see the point? You're going to take orders from a ghost—you and Usbeg Ali!"

Andry grinned — the grin slowly growing to a cavern from which laughter pealed, as appreciation dawned. Usbeg Ali Khan did not laugh; instead his jaw dropped, for he saw the hand of Allah in the business. Who but Allah had put tales into his Asiatic head about Dick being a dead man come to life again? Who but Allah could have made him take a chance and tell them? Who but Allah—now—after the tales were told and had gone creeping through the Persian bazaars—could have made men in a distant country write down this Dick Anthony as dead?

"There is no God but God!" he muttered in his beard. "*Yalam Allah wa'l zaman mu'allim!* God knows, and time will disclose His plans—may I be there!"

A quick survey, in the light of his new resolve, told Dick that he held a fist of trumps. Usbeg Ali Khan had been trained in war and lived in the hope of it; military drill and method—the art of making soldiers out of savages—were at his fingers' ends, and he had seven Afghan followers who had all served in the Afghan Amir's army where discipline is grim. Andry, too, was a soldier, trained in a Scots regiment. Only he himself was an amateur; and he had worked so hard in his boyhood days to fit himself for what he thought, then, was to be his future that he knew more military lore than Usbeg Ali Khan and Andry both together. He only lacked their experience; and to make up for that he had a genius for leadership.

"I'm King Dick, am I? Very well! The game begins!"

And it did begin, that minute.

WITHIN an hour he had chosen seventy men from among the bandits, and in tens had set them to drilling under Usbeg Ali's seven. Seven, who have heart enough to follow one man all through Asia in the mere hope of a brawl, can do wonders when it comes to teaching others—particularly when the others want to learn.

The words of command were English; Usbeg Ali saw to that. Long ago, before they started out, he had taught his seven to give orders and understand them in the tongue in which three parts of the fighting of the modern world has been directed. As worthy followers of a gentleman adventurer, it became them to be prepared. Andry and Usbeg Ali both hovered here and there, eliminating men who showed no aptitude. Dick busied himself selecting substitutes and organizing a party to go foraging.

Hitherto among those mountains it had been each man for himself, and he who could not steal might starve. Now, in a band one hundred strong under their old "head-man," Dick sent them to swoop down on a village in the plain below, where a contractor was accumulating stores to sell to Russia; a Joseph of Egypt in his own small way, he had a big granary full. It needed the forced labor of four villages and all the pressed cattle of a countryside to carry the loot up into the mountains.

And he appointed hunters; his own stomach and Andry's, if not those of Usbeg Ali and his seven, were likely to do better service on a meat régime. Indiscriminate hunting, without plan, had been one thing; the hunters had gone hungry formerly, while the game grew ever wilder; but this new, systematic, carefully instructed searching of the hillsides soon produced a larder millionaire epicures might well have envied.

The rest of the men were set to watch the seventy at drill, and soon the tens were trebled into thirties. Dick drove them remorselessly, but drove the instructors harder yet; by the third day the seven were commanding a hundred each, and there were five more hundreds drilling under the most promising recruits. Then Dick, Andry and Usbeg Ali Khan each took in hand a section of four hundred, and evolutions were the order of the day.

It was ragged work at first. They milled, and murmured, and grew miserable; but the voices they were learning now to trust rose and fell, rose and fell steadily, and by what seemed a miracle long lines of riflemen would untie themselves from a headless, tailless knot. Then they would do the thing again, still wondering. Then not wondering so much—then grinning—then, at last, almost bored by the simplicity of the thing, and obviously wondering why they could not do it right at first.

It was still ragged work. The orders had

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still to be translated into Persian, and the one-third who learned quickest led the denser two-thirds. No army in the civilized world would have dared parade so clumsily; no army but would have sneered at the thought of calling this one anything but mob. And yet, already—because it wanted to be one, and because each member of it tried from dawn to dark with all the heart he had—this was beginning to be an army that a force of conscripts twice as strong might wisely run away from. To a man, it marched with the weird, expectant thrill of coming conquest.

IT WAS after dawn on the fifth day when a spent horse galloped by the brook into the amphitheater, and a ragged Persian fell from it—staggered to his feet again—and tottered to Dick Anthony.

"Prince!" he said, speaking with great effort. "Lo! We were an escort! Lo! We bore a white flag! Lo! We did thy bidding! Lo! A white flag met us! There was parleying! We gave them their two women, unharmed and with nothing taken from them. They bade us wait. She who is named the Princess bade us wait, that we might be given presents. Lo! We waited, with our white flag still in front of us. Then came an officer of Cossacks—all alone—who spoke with us. He asked us questions and we boasted to him of our new chief. Lo! Even while we boasted, came the Cossacks and surrounded us!"

"Speak on!" said Dick grimly.

"Prince! God is my witness that I lie not! They took our white flag away. They took our horses. Lo! They tied us! They beat us dreadfully with knouts! Ten of us they shot and hung from tree-tops, and the rest of us they tied together two by two! Only yesterday they cut me loose and gave me a horse, and bade me say——"

He hesitated. In the East a man thinks twice, and prays to Allah, before delivering an insult or a message of ill-omen; he is likely to be the first victim of the listener's resentment.

"You have my leave to speak!" said Dick.

"They bade me say — he said — it was their officer who said—'Lo!' said he, 'tell him we come to flog his majesty!' "

"Did they court-martial the ten who were shot?" demanded Dick.

"Nay, they shot them!"

"No trial at all? No pretense of one?"

"They slew them as a butcher slays a sheep, save that bullets did duty for a knife!"

"And the rest are prisoners?"

"God is my witness that thirty-and-nine are prisoners, very badly beaten, and ill-fed."

"Oh!" said Dick; and the veins stood on his temples. Along his lips there ran a little line of white, and his left hand, clutching his sword-hilt, tightened until the knuckles seemed about to tear the skin.

"Attend to that man!" he ordered; and a Persian who had been trained as hospital-orderly in some mission-station led the messenger away.

"Form three sides of a hollow square!" commanded Dick.

It was the first time that order had been given, and the skill of Usbeg Ali Khan was sorely taxed as he shepherded them, company by company. The shouted orders, and mistaken orders rose and fell like the din of Babel; but always the will to obey was there, and so at last three sides of a square evolved from zigzagging confusion and the panting lines looked left and right in pride at their last achievement.

"I had meant," said Dick in Persian, when the panting ceased, and a man could make himself heard yet keep his dignity, "to drill longer and be readier before we marched. But Allah has seen fit—" he fell into Eastern idiom and phrase with an ease that delighted them—"to make the Russians mad, that we might have excuse at once for whelming them! We march to the whelming now! But—" he held his hand up, for he caught the beginning of a cheer—the rasp of indrawn breath and the quick eye-glance left and right—"listen, and weigh my words well! They—the Russians—have behaved like animals. We will behave like men! We go to rescue nine-and-thirty who are prisoners, and to teach a lesson; but the man who disregards a white flag—who tortures or kills a prisoner—who disobeys an officer or questions an order—the man, in fact, who behaves in manner unbecoming to a soldier fighting in a just cause — will die by my hand! I have spoken!"

He looked at them — slowly — once up, and once all down the line; and they eyed him. In breathless silence they recognized a true man speaking truth, and with a sigh

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that was their first real joint expression of united will they decided to obey. He knew, and they knew, from that minute that there was only one commander there; he knew he need not give another thought to his authority; he might lead them where he would, and order what he would.

He made each man turn into a common reserve every cartridge he owned more than thirty, and the reserve he ordered packed on the few mean pack-animals there were in camp. Each man was ordered to burden himself with a week's scant rations, and when the lines fell in again Dick passed along each rank and made them discard unnecessaries; whatever he refused to allow carried on the march he ordered cached, and he picked out ten old men to stay behind and guard the cache.

Then he sent Usbeg Ali Khan ahead with the advance guard, ordering him to fall back and command the left wing when the enemy were once discovered and engaged.

No dallying! Not too much strategy! Twelve hundred scarce-drilled Persians against a regiment of possibly eight hundred Russians—the odds were still on the Russian side! Above all, there rode at the head of the main body, in an unstarched shirt and without a collar, a good Scots gentleman who had thrown his weight in with the under-dog and who had taught himself to know that Justice is a wonder of a cause to join. He had no doubt at all about the outcome; he was riding to see Justice win, and he believed himself the tool of Justice.

To have divided his force would have been madness. He understood now, quite, that it was his own personality that knitted the twelve hundred into one, and until a little of his own idealism had found its way into their understanding he meant to keep them close and use their weight in quick, shock-tactics. He meant that every man of them should be able to see all the others when the moment came to put courage to the test. And so, he marched them down from the mountain-tops in a half-mile column, letting them grow used to the tramp of companies in step. Before long it amused them to feel the level places shake as twelve hundred feet would strike the earth together, then a hint of the strength of unity crept through the ranks and Dick could hear—in the column's changing voice—the growth of a new heart in them.

And, as once in Bible days when the stars in their courses fought against Sisera, the elements took sides with Dick and did the unexpected to confuse the Russians. Never at that season of the year was there a storm on the lower slopes of the Elburz range. Brown, dry grass, and water-courses shrunk to half their size, betrayed the season when a man might sleep out in the open without tent or blankets and be comfortable. Yet—as the head of the column reached the lower slopes, and at times from some projecting mound the Russian tents were visible—the sky grew cloudy. Big, black, lowering storm-clouds gathered and hung motionless above the plain.

So the Russian foraging parties rode back to camp, and the outposts were called in closer. Not more than half a watch was kept. Nobody believed, or could believe, that there was any danger, and the chief topic of conversation was the prospect of having to penetrate the mountains in bad weather and hunt starving outlaws through jungle-growth. News of the looting of the contract-corn had been brought in; it was necessary to recapture it—not for the contractor's sake, but to rob the mountainmen of a season's keep. But corn seemed a poor bait to tempt a regiment into the mountains under threatening, unseasonable clouds; the Cossacks dallied; and dallying—the mere idea of it—rots military manners.

IT WAS night and they were sleeping—many of their sentries, too, were sleeping—when the storm burst. Thunder that was like the bursting of a thousand guns shook the whole plain they camped on; then came the wind, hell-twisted from the mountain-heights and whirled, all wet and whistling, through gorge and valley from a dozen sides at once until it smote the camp. Lightning, forked and blue, showed a hundred fluttering spooks that had been tents all pitched in line. Instantly—before they were awake—men fought with wind and wet canvas in the drenching rain, shouting frantic orders that the thunder drowned—chilled to the marrow—disheartened—and a great deal more than half afraid, for a Cossack is not far removed from savagery and its superstitions cling.

Rain-softened, in ten minutes the whole plain was a mud-bed, out of which the tent-pegs drew as worms come at the bidding of

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a bird. Then a hundred horses, fastened together in a line, pulled their stakes free, and a minute later hell's delight was making as the hundred loosed themselves together through the frantic camp. Thunder, and rain, and whistling wind silenced the shouted orders; trumpets were another note of misery, with no more meaning to their call; the only light was the blue, forked flash that gave momentary glimpses of disaster gone amuck. And into that confusion, at the head of his twelve hundred, burst Dick Anthony!

The Cossacks tried to rally, but there was none to rally round. There was neither head, nor tail, nor center to the mad, mud-worried tangle, nor any one who knew enough of what was happening to get a crowd together and stem the stampede of the rest. A dozen lifted swords and shouted in a dozen places—to be swept aside as a string of tethered horses plunged it knew not whither, or a knot of men raced blindly for the outer, unencumbered spaces of the night.

It was butcher's work to fire into that mill; but war is war, and what the Cossacks suffered they had purchased at their own figure in advance. The marvel was that a bullet missed its billet, or a Cossack lived to shudder at the recollection of that night. A greater marvel yet was that Dick Anthony was able—in that darkness—in that din—to stay the avenging hand of mountain outlaws, and force—not beg, or persuade, or implore, but *force*—his will on them. He rode here and there like the spirit of the storm, and where his voice rang harsh through the ghastly din men listened.

That only a hundred and eighteen Cossacks died that night was due to Dick and his ability to bridle savagery. He sensed the surrender of the Russians—for no man could see ten yards away on either hand, nor could anybody hear the voice of a leader in the camp where there was none. Galloping through the blackness he found Andry—made him stop the wild pipe-music that was maddening the Persians into fury—ordered him to make his men cease fire—and then rode back along the long line, picking out each officer and forcing obedience on him.

Then he rode like the devil through a storm of wind and rain and bullets to where he guessed Usbeg Ali Khan might be; and he took that fierce border-soldier by the throat and shook him when he found him.

"Cease firing, d'you hear me! Call 'em off!"

"*Bahadur*, I——"

"Yes you can! Cease fire, I say! If there's another shot fired in ten minutes I'll shoot you! Come on—make 'em cease fire! Work 'em round the camp—surround it better—there is probably a gap they can break through to the North!"

Perhaps it was not ethical to threaten his subordinates with death unless his will had been imposed on savages within ten minutes; but, ethical or not, it worked! More quickly almost than the storm had burst, this second storm of bullets died away, and presently the dark, distressful camp was ringed around by men who leaned on hot rifles and called jests to one another through the rain. Then a voice yelled through the blackness:

"We surrendered long ago! Is there no quarter?"

"Is there a woman in the camp?" demanded Dick in Persian, for he did not mean to let it be known that he knew Russian until he had exhausted all the possibilities of seeming not to understand it.

"No. No women!"

"Thank God!" muttered Dick between his teeth.

"There were thirty-nine Persian prisoners!" said the same voice, "though where they are now God knows!"

"Find them!" demanded Dick. "Loose them and send them to me to be counted!"

"Who are you?" said the same voice. "To whom have we surrendered?"

"I am a dead man!" answered Dick. "I was drowned at sea and buried by the crew of a Russian ship! Obey me—find those prisoners and send them here—or I will teach you another lesson from the grave!"

There was no answer. Except that a string of horses plunged and snorted, where the lot had fallen, there was silence now from end to end of the stricken camp. Only, the wind shrieked over it in lessening fury, and the rain swished as if to wash away the horror. Then men began calling to each other, asking where the prisoners were. They were found soon, huddled under fallen tents, and were sent with their hands still tied behind them straight into the teeth of the rain to where Dick sat his horse. He counted them and let them pass behind him to be cared for. There was one

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man missing; but the others swore that they had seen him run away into the night.

"Now!" said Dick. "Whoever was commanding may advance and parley!"

Then a Commandant of Cossacks dragged his riding-boots uncomfortably through the mud for four hundred yards, and passed his sword hilt-first to Dick who took it and passed it to his Persian orderly.

"Provided my instructions are obeyed," said Dick, speaking Persian very slowly, "as many of you as are left may all go free at dawn. But any attempt to damage property—rifles, for instance—will result in your all being marched into the mountains and held there indefinitely! Have I made my meaning clear?"

The Russian did not answer.

"Is my meaning clear to you?"

"Yes. I am memorizing what you say. My government will be interested to know what the actual words were."

"Then, listen further! You will go back and order your men to lay down their arms. Then—under your orders—each man will advance straight ahead in the direction he chances to be facing, taking nothing with him but the clothes he stands in. Any man who has a weapon when he reaches the cordon that surrounds your camp will be shot instantly; whoever has no weapons may pass through unscathed. At dawn your men will be allowed to form up and march away under your command. Too much delay in disarming and passing through the cordon will be met by a resumption of hostilities. You had better hurry back!"

"You have delicious manners!" sneered the Russian.

"I have noticed the delicious state of the backs of prisoners you people make!" said Dick. "I don't pretend to regard you as a white man or a gentleman! I have given you some orders which I now advise you to hurry and obey!"

"—— —— you!" said the Russian, speaking all the English that he knew; then he turned on his heel before Dick could answer him and went squelching back to where his men waited in miserable, dark uncertainty.

Dick sent orderlies, then, careering through the murk to make his bandits understand what was intended. Within ten minutes Usbeg Ali came galloping back:

"*Bahadur!*" he exclaimed, when he had found Dick. "They will not do it! They refuse! They say 'kill all the Cossacks, or else make them prisoners!' What can I do?"

"You can enforce my orders!" answered Dick. "Be the blood of each murdered Cossack on your head, Usbeg Ali! Join your men, sir—and obey!"

Dick was obeyed, though no man ever knew what desperate seconds he and Andry and Usbeg Ali lived through while obedience and savagery swung against each other on the scales. Again and again, and twenty times again, the three passed up and down between the vengeful mountain-outlaws and loot, that lay for the taking in the rain. They murmured; but dawn found the ring around the stricken camp unbroken, with the Russian prisoners-of-war outside it and the dead and the loot within.

Dick had won a bigger fight than any one but he took time to realize, although his men were not disposed to underestimate. The sight of eight hundred rifles—ammunition — tents — money — food — nearly seven hundred horses—a machine-gun—swords — lances — and a mass of heterogeneous loot—enabled them to forgive the morbid-mindedness that let the prisoners go free, carrying their wounded. Only Dick, slinging a pair of looted binoculars across his shoulder, realized that he had bitted a blood-hungry mob, and reined it with the prey in sight. He wondered, as he remembered who had called him "king", how many real kings there were who could have saved one Cossack life that night, out of those eight hundred.

IV

THE Osmanli proverb has it that "of ten men, nine are women!" Change it about; rob the saying of its Eastern mysogeny, and we have the truth that of ten women one will be a man! The Princess Olga Karageorgovich, as a man in man's garments, might have risen to a throne by dint of sheer, shrewd energy and courage. But her sex handicapped her, and her love now for Dick Anthony turned out to be a fetter that she could not burst. She had laughed at sex and love!

She really loved Dick in her own strange, savage way. His straight way of striking at the heart of things—his true pride, where she had no pride at all—above all, his brave honesty that appealed to her because she was utterly dishonest—had captivated her

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and made her slave to the heart-throbs she despised not long ago. Now life without Dick Anthony seemed as empty and mean to her as that other married life that she avoided only by serving the Okhrana.

Had she been any but a she-devil, who loved tiger-wise, she might have won; for she was very beautiful, and Dick was a man to whom grim persistence appealed strongly. But love made her cruel, and he hated cruelty—revolted at the thought of it. What would have made another woman pitiful, stirred her to use underhanded ways of trying to bring Dick to his stubborn knees; and she did not realize that, once hers, once humbled to her level, she would have thoroughly despised him. Love, that should have been ennobling, made her false; she was ready to be false to Dick, herself, and the Okhrana all at once. She was ready, and more she was anxious to sacrifice a hundred thousand lives and money reckoned by the tax-wrung million, that she might make Dick her slave; and, with Russia's secret government behind her, she was probably the only woman in the world who could have tried, even, to pay such wanton's price.

She made many a mistake as she planned her moves; but not the least of them was in forgetting there were other women who might love, and love far more humanly. It never entered her inventive head to guess that her maid, Marie Mouquin, who had screamed at mere sight of grim, tremendous Andry, could really love the big man and pity him with all her heart even when dubbing him "Scots cannibal"! But, while the Princess loved her tawny-headed Dick, and stood ready to betray Russia—the Okhrana—anybody for him, Marie Mouquin loved the red-polled Andry—reveled while she shuddered at his tearing, crunching strength—and was ready, any minute, to betray the Princess!

The girl was not altogether in the Princess' confidence; but it is not possible for princess or commoner to let herself be waited on, day in, day out, by one servant without sharing almost if not all her secrets with that servant. The maid was French but could speak Russian fluently; she even knew a little English and some German, picked up on her travels; there was not a tongue in which the Princess could converse that her maid could not listen to and understand. And, like most good listeners, she had a useful memory.

So she was in a position to be dangerous, and was not at all a safe person to ignore. The Princess forgot how often she had slapped and pinched her—how many thousand different excuses she had given her to bear resentment. When she started into Persia on a trail that would have frightened nine men out of ten, and on a quest that ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have flinched from, she argued that the maid's refusal to be left behind was due to love, or loyalty, or to some other sentiment that the lower classes feel. A suggestion that the maid loved Andry would have met with ridicule.

So she rode out of Dick's forest-glade without looking once behind her. Dick would not come and say good-by, and therefore her next business lay ahead where men were who could help make him repent. She rode with her eyes straight forward and did not see her maid look back, nor Andry, the tremendous, throwing kisses. Later she did not notice that Marie Mouquin stroked some parts of her body tenderly—an elbow—half a dozen ribs—that had been crushed in the Scotsman's huge embrace.

She recalled, perhaps, that Andry had once been useful to her by reason that he thought himself "a de'il wi' the lassies"; but the maid, when she spoke of him, called him a devil pure and simple, and the Princess believed the woman spoke the truth. So she rode down-hill with a loose rein, busy with the future, not the past.

A night's rest under the protecting shadow of Dick's oak-tree had revived her, and she rode at a pace and with a fearlessness that put the outlaw escort on its mettle. The maid complained and the escort muttered, but headlong down the twisty trail she led them at a gallop, and kept them galloping until the maid's sufferings drew pity from men who had forgotten almost what the word meant.

Farther and farther ahead the Princess rode; farther and farther to the rear lagged Marie Mouquin; until at last a conversation started between her and a man who reined his horse into pace with hers, and dallied to keep her company. He knew enough Russian to understand her and to say the few things that occurred to him, but she began with the only Persian word she knew, knowing that it was the key to conversation under any circumstances.

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"*Poul!*" said Marie Mouquin, and the ragged horseman legged his mount nearer.

"Money?" he asked eagerly. "How much money, and for what?"

She spoke very slowly—very clearly—in Russian—one word to about ten paces of the horse, allowing no chance for misinterpretation provided he knew any of the language.

"Me — I — give — you — money — if — you — follow — us — to — Astrabad — and take—message—back!"

"Message back to whom?" he asked.

"That very big, great, ugly man!"

"Annreema — Doogeel?" he asked, for Andry Macdougal is not a name that lends itself to Persian utterance.

She nodded.

"How much money?" he inquired.

"A hundred roubles!"

"Not enough!"

"Then, two hundred!"

Had she risen by five roubles at a time they might have compromised for some price in the neighborhood of a hundred and forty roubles; but, since she seemed inclined to rise by hundreds, he saw fit to encourage her.

"Five hundred!" he demanded.

"Two hundred and fifty then—not a rouble more! I have no more! I am a poor woman! I have only two hundred and fifty roubles in the world!"

She lied, and he did not believe her; but then, lies are fair exchange along that frontier, and are likely to remain so until Russia's arm is palsied and her grip is loosed. They argued for an hour or more of downhill bumping, and agreed at last on three hundred roubles as a reasonable basis for discussion of the main idea.

"When we reach the Cossack camp, what next?" she asked.

"We give you two women to the Cossacks, and—*inshallah*—we ride back."

"Then, no three hundred roubles!"

"Beard of Allah's Prophet! For three hundred roubles am I asked to disobey my orders, having sworn only a few hours ago to obey in all things? Do I dream? Or art thou mad? What, then, are three hundred roubles?"

"Three hundred roubles are the price!" she answered. "Hide—follow me secretly to Astrabad—find me there—and take a message back—or no three hundred roubles!"

"Allah!" swore the Persian. "I have heard said Hell is full of women!" Then in painstaking Russian he demanded, "Who guarantees me? Who guarantees me I will not be beaten, or even killed, for carrying back insults to my new chief and his man?"

"And thou a Persian! I thought all Persians would take any chances for three hundred roubles! Think, man—three—hundred—*roubles!*"

"I have yet to see them and feel their weight! Now payment in advance——"

"Will not be contemplated!" said the maid.

With a wisdom learned from much experience of driving bargains, she left the discussion where it was then and whipped her tired horse in an endeavor to catch up with her mistress. When the Persian came abreast of her and tried to reopen the discussion, she only laughed at him and shook her head.

"Three hundred roubles! Are you afraid?" she mocked.

He had drawn no more out of her by evening when a Russian challenge brought them to a halt. When the Princess summoned the maid to her side and rode past Cossack outposts to the camp, the man was in a state of mind peculiar to no nation and no age; he feared, lusted and disbelieved in turn—was hot and cold in turn—and no more dared commit himself than he dared refuse, for fear some other man might earn the money.

DOWN on the plain in the Cossack camp in the circling hollow of a hill-spur, the Princess had opportunity at last to show her temper.

"Food!" she demanded; and while they made it ready she gave orders that were obeyed unhesitatingly, whatever the officers and men thought of them.

"Surround the rabble that brought us here! Shoot ten of them and hang them to trees! Whip all the rest and put them in irons! Which ten? What do I care? Shoot any ten! Give Anthony something to simmer over up in those hills of his! Give me time to make Astrabad and then send one prisoner back; let him take an insolent message—one that will sting friend Anthony where he keeps his Scots pride! He needs rousing!"

A little later on she smiled as she heard the shots that took ten lives at her caprice. She walked nearer, to a place whence she

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could hear the swish and crack of a Cossack whip descending on naked backs. She smiled quite sweetly as she listened. Yet, down in her inmost heart, she actually thought that sooner or later she could win Dick Anthony and make him love her for herself alone—Dick Anthony who would rather die any day, and anyhow, than forget to be a gentleman!

Later, she slept, smiling in her sleep; and she rose at dawn refreshed, sweet-tempered, and so full of hope that she was like a ray of sunshine in the camp. She smiled on the Cossack escort that awaited her—complimented the under-lieutenant who commanded the ten men—chaffed him until he fell head over heels in love with her and was ready to die for her that minute—and mounted without help, springing to the saddle like a man.

She was off, then, without another word to anybody, leaving maid, officer and escort to follow her as best they could—off, full-pelt, for Astrabad and the hidden heart of things. She rode like a devil possessed of devils. She halted at midday for an hour, and not again until at evening the horses could not gallop another mile without rest.

After a cold supper she lay down near her horse and slept in the open without pillow or more than horse-rug. Her only care seemed to be lest the start at dawn should be delayed, and only she of all her party slept at all; the maid sobbed all night from utter weariness.

Dawn saw her off again—first in the saddle and first away. All that morning—half that afternoon—she rode at full gallop, until the horses swayed on numb, weak legs, and even the tough Cossacks of her escort groaned aloud. The maid, half fainting, clung to the saddle by the peak and prayed.

At four in the afternoon the cavalcade rattled and pounded into Astrabad, and the poor leg-weary horses dropped their heads, to stand blowing by a Cossack-guarded door. The Princess sprang to the ground just as the knees of her own horse gave under it, and it lurched forward in the roadway dead; then, not troubling to thank or to dismiss her escort, she half-ran up the steps between two Cossack guards and disappeared through a door marked "Private —No Admittance" in three languages—Russian, Persian, French.

Two of the escort lifted the maid down and helped her to the steps where she sat with her head between her hands and waited until, at dusk, the Princess came out again on the arm of a man in uniform. She was laughing, and the man—who, by the ribbons on his breast, was a person of importance—showed her a deference that seemed incongruous, considering her dustiness and saddle-tired dishevelment.

He waited for her while she rallied the Cossack officer for looking more pinched and weary than his horse—dismissed the escort without thanks—and stood to laugh at the stiff leg-action as the weary horses trotted off. Then she took her companion's arm and turned with a little laugh at the dead horse that had carried her.

"Your maid?" he asked. "She seems ill."

The Princess looked triumphant, and in her case triumph and cruelty were generally one. She turned again to survey the girl with a glance that had not one spark of pity in it.

"I need a woman of wire and leather to keep pace with me!" she said. "That Marie Mouquin is good enough for town-life, but for campaigning——!" She laughed, and shrugged her shoulders. "Come along! Let her follow if she can!"

"If she can not follow I will——"

"Come along!" the Princess interrupted with another shoulder-shrug; and she did not trouble to look around once to see whether the maid came after her or not.

"Where's Lancaster?" she asked.

"In jail."

"What idiot ordered that?"

"Stromski has been cast to act for him. Stromski is busy signing Lancaster's name to telegrams. High Finance is being asked to cable money for Richard Anthony!"

"Have a care!" she said sharply. "It is tricks of that sort—monkey-tricks of that sort—that ruin well-laid plans! Who was the idiot who ordered it?"

"We are being very, very careful," he assured her. "He is *incommunicado*." He used a Russian word that only bears translation into Spanish, though it implies more rigor than the Spaniards generally use. "When the road is clear, and there is opportunity, he goes over the border. Siberia!"

"What idiot ordered it?" she asked.

"Princess, I——"

"What idiot ordered it?"

"The idea was mine. I——"

"Idiot! Meddler! Monkey, putting fingers in machinery it doesn't understand! Idiot, d'you hear me?"

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They had reached a Persian palace that looked from the outside like a jail. Four high walls, pierced in places by little slit-like windows, but mostly blank, fronted on four different streets; only a door, deeply carved and set in a centuries-old frame, hinted at splendor and luxury within. They stopped in front of the door to finish their conversation, and still neither of them turned to notice that the maid had followed and was close behind.

"Princess! Lancaster is safe! He is locked in the old jail—the one-cell jail—and is guarded day and night! If you prefer it he might be——"

"Idiot! Since the mistake is made, keep him alive! A prisoner is a mystery not to be spoken of. A dead man is the subject for a tale! Hurry him over the border when the next convoy goes, and do what you like with him on that side; but let nothing happen to him here! Be careful that he gets no message to Anthony! And listen, my friend——"

She came a step closer to him to tap his beribboned chest, and he looked terrified.

"It is I who make plans and who give orders on this side of the boundary! You are he who hears them, and obeys! Do you understand?"

He did not answer.

"Do you understand, my friend?"

"Yes," he said sulkily.

"Then remember! And—don't try to grow too rich!"

"Princess, I——"

"And don't let your subordinates—say, for instance, Stromski—grow too rich! Remember!"

She produced a key, then, and without another word to him opened the old carved door into a courtyard that was filled with the scent of flowering shrubs—in which a fountain splashed—and in which it did not seem possible to think of the dusty world outside. The maid slipped through behind her, and the door was then slammed shut by a big black Ethiopian. The man in uniform saluted the door, in a sort of stupor, and passed on.

WHAT goes on in a Persian house is mystery, unless the eunuchs or the women can be made or coaxed to speak. All day long, day after day, messages and telegrams were carried in to the Princess, and answers carried out again.

Two new regiments of Cossacks and a battery of artillery were marched in through the town, to take up quarters in a confiscated palace. The city was a-hum, and there was much talk in the by-streets and bazaars about Dick Anthony. A reward was placarded about the town for him, offered by the Russian government. Instead of Persian, the city might have been a Russian border-stronghold.

The Russian flag floated in a dozen places, in flagrant violation of one recent treaty and a hundred promises. Russian officers and Russian clerks swaggered here and there; Cossack non-commissioned officers bullied and ill-treated the inhabitants. Every jail available was filled to the stifling point with Persians who had been unwise enough to show resentment at the Russian breach of faith.

In only one prison — the old one-cell prison — was a man who had elbow-room and air enough to breathe. It was a small, square building with a high stone-wall around it, and a ditch. In front of its one entrance a Cossack sentry paced, and he was in full view all the day from a dozen windows, behind which sat Russian officers and clerks.

Marie Mouquin—recovered after three or four days from the physical effects of her adventure in the hills, and back again in favor for the sake of her good services as maid—sallied out to see things, and soon found the little jail; but, though she watched and asked cautious questions, she failed to discover a means of communicating with its solitary prisoner. Three times a day food was taken in. Once in four hours, day and night, the guard was changed. Only after dark was the man on guard not overseen from a dozen windows. But what could she—one woman—do at night?

She knew Lancaster to be a one-eyed, ugly Englishman, connected in some way with financial houses, but of no conceivable interest to herself. She would not have given him or his jail and guards a thought, but for having overheard that he was not to be allowed to communicate with Anthony. Where Anthony was, was Andry also. What must not be allowed to reach Dick would almost certainly be good for him to hear; and what was good for him was good for Andry, too. Not for nothing, nor yet quite passively, was she in love with grim, gigantic Andry!

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She began to scheme—to plan—to disguise herself and wander when she dared, and where she dared about the city, hoping to pick up some thread or other that might lead to a solution of the problem she had set herself to solve.

It was late on an afternoon when she had gone, veiled like a Persian woman, to the outskirts of the city, and paused while a muezzin chanted from his tower, that the link between her, Lancaster and Andry came to her out of the unexpected.

"Allah is mighty!" boomed the voice above her. "I declare there is no God but God! Hie ye to prayer! Hie ye to salvation! There is no God but God!"

The man paused and the city seemed to hush, waiting for him to begin again. She heard him hawk as he cleared his throat for a second effort.

"*Allah il akbar!*" he began again; but then he stopped.

She looked up and saw him leaning outward—gaping—his jaw dropped in astonishment and his hands clutched tight on the stone rail of his little balcony. Something uncanny, almost inhuman in his attitude made her forget caution, wisdom, and every other thing but curiosity. She ran to the tower steps—opened the little door—and hurried, panting and stumbling, up the winding stone steps to the top. There she too leaned far out over the rail and stared in amazement at the sight on the plain beyond.

There came a column of men, marching in fours, who hung their heads. It was most of a regiment, without its horses or its arms, dragging its feet painfully. It was led by a commanding-officer who limped in tight riding-boots, unclean, unshaven. There was no advance-guard to announce their coming; they came in silence, overhung by a pall of powdery dust that seemed like the blanket of their shame.

They had reached the city gate before anybody thought of running to announce them; and they were inside the city before the alarm had reached headquarters and a dozen mounted orderlies went clattering through the streets to ask excited questions. Then it was too late to halt them and keep them where Persians of the streets and cellars would not ask questions, too, and answer them themselves. They were permitted to march through the streets and hide in a stolen palace that had been their barracks before they rode out to harry Dick Anthony.

"Dee-k-Anthonee has fought his first fight, and has won it!" went the murmur through by-ways and down passages; until the whole of native Astrabad was a-whisper, and a spirit of unrestfulness—a hint of the reawakening of courage of a people—went abroad; and the Russian officers who recognized it talked of stern precautions—talked too late!

"Where are their weapons? Where are their horses? See what he has done to them? But see! Come and see! The tales about him are surely—must be—true!"

Marie Mouquin ignored the questions and outraged talk of the muezzin. She hurried down the steps and found her way to the palace where her mistress waited for her, fuming with impatience. She hoped to be first with the news, and first to judge the effect of it.

But she was stopped at the palace-corner by a tattered man who plucked her skirt and pulled so hard at it that she was forced to turn and speak to him.

"*Poul!*" he said quietly; and she recognized the man who had ridden beside her down from Dick's amphitheater in the mountains.

"Three hundred roubles was the price!" he said, pushing his face close to hers.

"Come back tonight—at midnight!" she ordered him. "There will be a letter ready, to be taken back."

"And the roubles? Where will the roubles be?"

"They will be ready, too! Wait! Listen! How did you know me, dressed like this?"

The Persian laughed—laughed for a minute at her, showing her the inside of his throat, and a dozen blackened, rotting teeth. Then he pointed to her shoes.

"Does one of our women wear shoes like a man's, made in Faranghistan?" he asked. "And walk any of our women this wise?"

He imitated a European woman's walk that looks grotesque to Persian eyes; nor did he spare her feelings; his caricature was crude and very far from kind.

"Ay!" he said, laughing again. "Here I will be tonight, at midnight to the minute! And let the roubles be here too, or I will raise a howl that will bring the eunuchs running! Be ready with thy letter for 'Doogeel, for I, too, have a message for Dee-k-Anthonee. See my shoulders!"

He pulled his torn shirt open and dis-

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played a mess of Cossack whip-weals. Then he laughed again and left her.

"Midnight, tonight!" he called back from the corner.

V

SO IT happened that two letters reached Dick's mountain glade within an hour one afternoon; one was for himself, and one for Andry. The men who carried them crept into camp anxiously, for one had been sent by Dick before he assumed the chieftainship; he had no means of knowing just what had happened in the meantime, and he did know that he bore unpleasant news, for the letter had been handed him with scowls; it bore the mark of the British Legation and a Russian frankas well.

Dick—mounted on a Cossack charger—was drilling horsemen, now, on a big flat parallelogram of ground beyond and above the glade. To quote Andry, he was "makkin' siccar"; to give his own account of it, he could not believe that the British Minister would refuse eventually, when a letter reached him at last, to accept his surrender and grant him a fair trial; but he was taking precautions in case the Princess had forecasted accurately. And, as a matter of sheer fact, his genius for leadership had hold of him, and he was using every second to perfect his force, instead of theorizing.

He leaned from the saddle—snatched the letter from the ragged messenger—and tore it open. That was the first and the last time that a Persian ever saw him betray the least nervousness. At first the man thought that his lacerated shoulders showing through a blood-smeared shirt had made Dick blench. He tore the shirt to make a more ghastly showing, but "Go and have it seen to!" ordered Dick. His fingers trembled so that he could barely read. His charger had a hard mouth and fought for the bit constantly; but it could not have been the effort to restrain the horse that made his hand shake, for—as he read—his fingers clenched—his fist grew hard, and still, until the knuckles showed white through the brown skin—and his lips set tight. In another moment there was not a symptom left of anything but pride, and defiance absolute.

The letter ran:

My good man, whatever your real name and nationality may be, let me inform you that Richard Anthony, of Arran in Scotland, has been dead many weeks, and he was the last male of his line. You are therefore a proved impostor. Your letter was forwarded to me through the courtesy of the Russian authorities to whom—whatever your nationality or your pretensions, and whatever your offense against the law—I recommend you to surrender. I can take no official cognizance of you. I am, sir, etc.

At the end was the penciled, scrawled signature of a man who would have risked his life willingly to help an Anthony of Arran, had he even half believed that a real Anthony really needed help.

Andry watched Dick's face from a little distance. Nothing could make the big man like a horse, or ride with the least enthusiasm; so, since the force was to be mounted infantry and Andry was a force on his own account on foot, he was allowed to watch the evolutions and find fault with them from the vantage ground of a boulder-top. There, from time to time, he played on Dick's bagpipes to encourage the horsemen; thence, at very frequent intervals, he shouted to call Dick's attention to some "loon, wha couldna ride Balaam's ass!" The man he singled out would be dismounted and replaced by one of the ever-swelling crowd of fugitives from the plains.

"Hoots! Hoots!" he muttered as he watched Dick now. "There'll be a stor-r-rm br-r-rewin'—a stor-r-rm worth twa o' any that's been yet! Ou-ay—weel I ken the signs!"

He got down from his rock and strode toward Dick—stood beside him, making the charger look almost like a pony in proportion—scratched his red hair and waited, since the moment seemed inopportune for speech. Dick let him wait until curiosity boiled over and the big man had to speak or burst.

"An' what would yon bit writin' be aboot?" he asked at last.

"About a fight!" said Dick.

"Her that's past—her wi' the Cossacks down below there?"

"No," said Dick. "About a fight to come. It seems, Andry, that I've got to prove myself an Anthony of Arran!"

"Ah!"

"Watch the drill!" commanded Dick. "I want to think a while!"

"Ou-ay!"

Andry sought Usbeg Ali Khan and nearly tore his horse's jaw off in an innocent attempt to halt him sooner than the law of gravity allowed.

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"Dom the hor-r-rse!" he answered the Afghan, oath for oath.

He had forgotten who was second-in-command and his actual superior; on second thought—on second consideration of the strength that had brought the horse to a standstill—the Afghan did not venture to remind him.

"What is it, then?" asked Usbeg Ali.

"Naethin'—only this. Have ye been drillin' 'em? 'Twas little baby's play to what I bid ye do! Have ye put fire in 'em? Put bur-r-rnin' volcanoes in 'em noo, ma mon! Ar-r-re ye ready? Ar-r-re ye lookin' for-r-rward eagerly to what's ahead? Mon—y'r een 'll be poppin' oot in a little while wi' sheer amazement! Mon—mon—there'll be a verra great deal o' seerious fechtin' sooner than a body would believe wi'out he knew. But I know! I ken the signs! I've just had wor-r-rd wi' Mr. Dicky! Aye! He's decided that it's time to prove himself an Anthony of Arran!"

Together he and Usbeg Ali held a consultation that was mostly listening on the Afghan's part and law laid down by Andry with a vehemence that defied answer.

"I agree wi' ye on a' the points!" said Andry at the end of it. "Ye're a consairvative, carefu' mon an' y'r arguments won't bear answerin'. There's naethin' more ridiculous than me givin' orrrders to several hundred men who don't understand more 'an the half I say. An' yon machine-gun we took fra the Roosians is the verra identical contraption that is suited to ma genius! Y'r in the right—dead right—an' I agree wi' ye! I think better of ye for havin' said so! As second-in-command, now, 'tis your affair to go to Mr. Dicky an' suggest the arrangement. Tak' one o' y'r ane men wi' ye, an' ask leave to promote him to my place. I'll go an' monkey wi' the mechanism while ye have y'r interview!"

He strode away and left the Afghan to do his bidding; and while Usbeg Ali talked with Dick he drove away the Persians who were trying to tell head from tail of the machine-gun, under the amateur tuition of one of the seven whom Usbeg Ali advertised as knowing everything pertaining to the art of war. In twenty minutes he had, back at his fingers' ends, all the carefully instilled machine-gun drill that is part of the training of British infantry. Then he counted the ammunition-boxes. Then he picked out a dozen men to learn to spring like lightning at the first spat syllable of a Highland oath. And while he was picking men the second note arrived. The tattered messenger brought it to him in a cleft stick and held it out at arm's length.

"Tak' it to Mr. Dicky yonder!" he said, pointing.

But the Persian shook his head and pushed the letter forward; so Andry took it. His face, when he saw that the stained envelope was addressed to Mr. Andry Macdoogle, was a sight to have made all Asia laugh—mixed excitement, scorn for the spelling, and astonishment. He tore the envelope open under the eyes of a small army, whose attention had been caught by his grimaces.

Marie Mouquin wrote:

> Lancasser is in jail. He is lock up now but I think they kill him presently. Perhaps he go to Siberia. The Cossacks came this evening, without horses, without rifles, without anything. All Astrabad is excited. *She* says it is very good, but *they* say it is too bad. The telegraph now says King Dick is too much and kill him quick. Positively yes, other Cossacks and artillery will march against King Dick very soon now. So, beware. Send another man to me and I will send all the news. I paid this man three hundred roubles.
>
> Your loving
>
> MARIE MOUQUIN.

"An' I kissed her but three times!" said Andry to himself. "The lassie has a verra gude impression o' the meanin' of a fair return!" He walked over, grinning, to where Dick sat listening to Usbeg Ali's notion of a plan.

"There!" he said, holding out the letter. "That comes o' kissin' a wumman, instead o' treatin' her wi' scorn! Nex' time, mannie, ye'll do well to tak' y'r Princess i' baith arrrms an' squeeze nonsense oot o' her an' gude faith in!"

Dick read the letter, frowning. Then he tossed it back.

"All right," he said quietly. "Can you use that machine-gun?"

"I can indeed."

"How many rounds have you?"

"Six thousand an' a few more."

"D'you want to take command of the gun?"

"There's naethin' I'd like better!"

"Do it, then. Spend the rest of today teaching a crew to help you. D'you want men to draw it, or horses?"

"Dom horses!"

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"Very well—choose the men. Take five hundred rounds tomorrow and practise at a target. And—listen——!"

Andry had started off to his gun but he turned back.

"Next time you want anything—want any change made—ask me! It saves time."

"Well," said Andry, scratching his red head, "ye've read her letter. What I want noo is a man to run back an' forth, tween me an' her, an' bring messages."

"Choose one!" said Dick.

"And——"

"Well? What else?"

"Do ye know a worrrd or two o' Roosian, Mr. Dicky?"

Dick did not answer him.

"Because—what's the Roosian, say, f'r dearie, an' sweetheart, an' the like o' that?"

"I'll get Usbeg Ali Khan to write you down some sentences to copy out," said Dick, and Andry departed satisfied.

"How many men do the last arrivals say the Russians have in Astrabad?" asked Dick, resuming his talk with Usbeg Ali where he had left off.

"They say more than four thousand, *bahadur*, including guns."

"According to that letter, the guns are to start out after us. That means they'll send at least half the force with them. Guns would be no good in these mountains—or not much good—and they must know it. Probably they mean to coax me down into the open and smash me at longish range. Good! Very well, Usbeg Ali. Get your seven together some time tonight and give them a good talking to; put fire into them. But impress them with the need for exact obedience."

"Very good, *bahadur*."

"Exercise the companies tomorrow, all together. I expect to be busy attending to about a thousand details."

"Yes, *bahadur*."

"And caution the men to be ready for a start at dawn the day after tomorrow. This time I shall serve out a hundred rounds per man, but otherwise we will march light."

"March on where, sahib?"

"On Astrabad, of course."

"Of course?"

"Of course!" said Dick; and Usbeg Ali went off wondering.

VI

WHEN Marie Mouquin wrote Andry that the city of Astrabad was "excited," she omitted nine-tenths of the truth. Within its thirty-foot-high mud-wall the place hummed like a bee-hive, and the streets resounded to the clatter of galloping orderlies. The bazaar was not one whit less noisy than the quarter that had been made over to the Russians; it buzzed with wakening energy, and two *sotnias* of Cossacks were judged needful to parade the streets and force on the crowd a semblance of restraint.

In the palace where the Princess had her quarters was the most disturbance. There a constant stream of telegrams and answers flowed in and out, while men in uniform kept calling, to be interviewed and sent away again. The Cossacks, doing sentry duty at the outer door, looked red-faced out of sympathy with the tension strained within. The situation was out of hand and the Princess labored to regain control of it. She stormed; she showed authority in writing, that made her responsible for all that took place on the Persian side of the border; the military granted it was genuine, saluted, and refused obedience.

"There has been disaster, for which you are responsible!" they answered. "Now we will remedy disaster in our own way, on *our* responsibility!"

She sent telegrams, and so did they. Answers came to the effect that she, and only she, had authority to act and issue orders. But, in the last resort, the military always manage to be conscious of the fact that might is theirs. Civilian power is theory; theirs is practise. By sheer weight of their count of guns and men their arguments began to have the better of it, and by grudging inches at a time the Princess yielded.

She wrote hurriedly:

> Dick! Dear Dick! Escape at once along the mountain-range, to the unexplored country in the northeast! I can not check the flood of indignation! You beat them too thoroughly! Run, Richard—run, and fight again! I can not stop them from starting after you, with guns, nor from trying to capture and kill you this time. Run away to the mountain-tops in time!

She sent the letter to the mountains by the hand of a man whom she believed she could trust; but she confirmed her trust by the promise of a most prodigious money-

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bribe in case the man delivered the letter safely and brought back an answer.

In her letter she summed up the situation to a nicety. Just as well as the military could, she saw the genius behind Dick's release of prisoners. Had he marched them to the mountains, he might have exchanged them against the contents of the jails of Astrabad; but prisoners would have hampered his action awfully, and he would have had to send them back with their arms and the machine-gun if he hoped to make any exchange at all.

As it was, he left them only one course. The only place where they could get food, or reärm, was Astrabad. They had no horses; no one could ride ahead and save their faces for them; they had to march and be seen, and be laughed at. News travels in the East like a prairie-fire, and grows hotter—more disturbing—as it runs. Not only Astrabad but Persia began to crackle with the story of Dick Anthony; and Dick up in his mountains needed do no more than hold his tongue while an army flocked to him, and all through Persia other bands of men got ready to make progress easy for him. Anything was better than the Russian yoke!

The Russian military men—no lovers of the Okhrana that always made use of them, and always robbed them of the fruit of all their toil—made up their minds to strike fast and hard before the gathering storm of Persian rebellion could burst. They dared not leave Astrabad undefended; nor were two regiments a man too many to leave behind. What remained then would be none too great a force with which to strike at a successful outlaw. But they dared not wait for reënforcements, because delay might mean the arrival of some personage with orders to compel inaction. They dared defy this woman; and the thought of rehabilitation in their own—the Army's—and Persia's eyes was sweet.

Quick action seemed their only chance. Her letter on its way, the Princess objected less and less, and finally gave in. It seemed better to her to give way gracefully, without committing herself by a direct consent, than to be overridden and so lose her prestige and whatever of authority was left. The arrival of somebody from Russia to supersede her would have been too great disaster to be borne.

She was present when they made their plan to send two regiments and a battery, and though she did not agree to it she contented herself by smiling enigmatically and saying nothing more against it. Later she wrote another note to Dick and sent it by a second messenger. Dick received neither message. A few hours before the Russian force marched out of Astrabad, he made his move. While they were thrashing out their plan to leave the guns on the plain and draw him down to them by fighting a slow rear guard action, when the rest had penetrated to the hills and got in touch—he was already off at the head of a force that had grown to three thousand men.

One of many reasons why he marched so soon—a reason that impelled him nearly as much as his desire to rescue Lancaster—was that the fugitives from Russian rule were gathering too quickly to his standard. He had a drilled force now, but it looked like being swamped by undrilled men whose one desire would probably be loot. So he marched while his fame was fresh and the result of capturing a regiment, with a loss of none, was still told in the language of respectful awe.

He had seven hundred mounted men and fifty gallopers. There were more than a thousand men who marched with the steady thunder that betokens spirit as well as drill. And there were fourteen hundred new-joined infantry who might be counted on to help a winning side, but who would only handicap him in the case of a reverse. He would have been more satisfied with none besides the drilled men; but it was there that his authority reached its high-water mark, for there were none who would have obeyed and stayed behind.

So the rows of looted Russian tents were struck and cached with the outlaw household goods and all the truck and litter that usually travels with a Persian army, but that Dick would not tolerate. Then Andry, striding by his gun, struck up a good Scots marching tune and Dick led off along the mountain-tops, choosing a watershed that circled around and down to the level land on the farther side of Astrabad. He had no hope of catching the Russians unawares this time, but he did mean to strike from the side where they felt safest and were least prepared.

Two letters from the Princess, and one from her maid, sought Dick among the hills and kept ahead of the advancing Russians,

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while Dick marched swiftly — tired the horses out—and pushed the men to their last, leg-weary limit. He wanted none but the die-hards with him. Each night—or at dawn after a cold sleep in the open—when they brought him news of fresh defections he was glad. On the march when men fell out by fours and dozens—even by half-companies—he sent back word that those might follow him who could and the others might go home again.

When he reached at last the lowest spur that overlooked the plain and the city of Astrabad was visible through a heat-haze in the distance, Usbeg Ali rode ahead to tell him the exact condition of the force.

"But nineteen hundred men, *bahadur!* Heh! Never was there army yet that could hold half that speed for days on end! Three days of forced marching along mountain-tops! Three nights in the open! The wonder is the nineteen hundred are not nine!"

"Men who can march can generally fight!" said Dick. "I have found out which the good men are; the devil may take the rest!"

"But the horses! Horses, *bahadur*——"

"Are in Astrabad in plenty. We will help ourselves!"

"Young blood! Young blood!" the Afghan muttered. Then aloud, "Sahib," he said, "very far away in the distance yonder is a dust-cloud."

"I've been looking at it through these glasses," answered Dick.

"I think it is the rear-guard of a Russian force that has marched out of Astrabad but recently to hunt us in the hills."

"I can see it is," said Dick.

"Our proper course would have been, *bahadur*, to have rushed the city now, at once, while it is unprepared and before those soldiers can come back again. But heh! The men are weary, and the horses limp!"

"We'll rest here today and tonight!" said Dick. "And you may leave the selection of the proper course to me! Give orders that the man who shows himself, or lights a fire, will be shot. The same dose exactly for the man who leaves the spot he stands on, without permission. Throw out a screen of pickets, post the men carefully, and then report to me again! You have your orders, Usbeg Ali Khan!"

"Oh, but ma bones ache wi' the marchin'!" grumbled Andry, appearing from behind and throwing himself down beside Dick. "I've lifted yon gun wi' these twa han's o'er more boulders than I thought there were in a' the wor-r-rld, an' I'm aweary!"

"Go and sleep!" said Dick. "D'you hear me? Go and sleep. We rest here until tomorrow. Then I want you in condition."

"I'll lie doon here beside ye, Mr. Dicky."

"Sleep by your gun!"

"Ou-ay!"

The big man walked away obediently, and Dick sat musing, staring at Astrabad through his binoculars and conning the land between, until Usbeg Ali came back and reported the outposts placed. Then Dick went round with him and checked them off, speaking to each man and assuring himself that they all understood their duty.

"Being king's a heavy business!" he laughed when they were back again on the brow of the hill. "How's being second, Usbeg Ali?"

"Like anything worth while, *bahadur!* A man pays the price!"

"Could you pass a night without sleep, do you think?"

"I? I am a soldier!"

"How far back was it that a hundred and twenty men or more fell out in a body all together?"

"That was last night, twenty miles away."

"They came a long way before they gave in!"

"Ay! They are good men. They swore they would rest and collect other stragglers and then follow."

"There might be five hundred of them, then, by this time?"

"Very likely more than that, *bahadur*."

"Will you go, then, Usbeg Ali—now—and take charge of those men. Yes, ride at once. As early as you can tomorrow morning I want you to lead all the stragglers you can rally in a demonstration against the city from *that* side. Make all the noise you can, and seem to be as big a force as possible—extend your men, to that end. Get as near the city as you can. But, when your men want to run, let them; make it a retreat, if you can, and not a rout, but let them run and draw the Russians in pursuit. Then we will descend from this side and the city is ours. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly, *bahadur!*"

"Then, good-by, Usbeg Ali!"

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"We will meet in Astrabad, *bahadur!*"
"In Astrabad!" said Dick.
The Afghan saluted and was gone.

VII

A LITTLE after dawn Dick, watching through his glasses, made out Usbeg Ali, riding at the head of somewhere near five hundred men, and he chuckled as he noted the formation. With soldier-skill, the Afghan had his men drawn up in such way as to seem to be a screen for a bigger force behind. Dick laughed aloud as he saw messengers sent back to the rear at intervals, and other messengers come running from the rear, as if to keep up communication with the other force.

Astrabad gave early warning of the trick's success. Dust rose above house-walls and betrayed the marching companies that concentrated in a hurry to oppose Usbeg Ali. It was all too circumstantial to be discredited, for the attack was coming from a side the outlaws would be bound to take, supposing they had made a flank-march through the hills; the Russian commandant brought almost every man from the other sides of the city to deal quickly with what he described as impudence. It suited him very well indeed to keep the credit to himself for avenging the disaster of a week ago, and he did not—just yet—send any messenger to tell the men who had marched away of what was happening.

Dick—descending an hour later at the head of a long, extended line, and making no noise—was not observed until the space between him and Astrabad was less than that between the Russians and the city. The Russians and Usbeg Ali were engaged and firing hotly before a lot of galloping and a hint of fresh formations in the Russian line warned Dick he had been seen. The Russians seemed to divine his intent of rushing on the city; they started to retreat and gave Usbeg Ali an opportunity that he was quick to seize. Swift, savage firing from the Afghan's line wrought havoc in the reforming Russian ranks and put such heart into the Persians that Dick changed his plan instantly, or rather carried it to its logical extreme. He sent all his infantry, and Andry with his machine-gun, to Usbeg Ali's aid, taking the Russians on their flank and forcing them to stand or else be routed. Then, like an avalanche—reckless of what opposition might be left, and only thoughtful of the end in view—he launched himself at the head of his horsemen and swept straight on Astrabad.

The Russians seemed to think he had decided, now, to attack their rear, for they changed formation once again and gave Usbeg Ali yet another chance to riddle them while at a disadvantage; the Afghan seized it. By the time the Russians realized that Dick was really heading for the city, Andry's machine-gun had added its hell-stutter to the rest; and then Usbeg Ali galloped to the newcomers and placed himself at the head of the whole advancing force. After that there was nothing for the Russians but a grim, determined stand if they hoped for less than rout or else surrender.

And while they lay to fire, and set themselves doggedly to show mere outlaws how trained soldiers can recover from a setback, Dick galloped past them out of range—rode on, and on to the city gate. He had expected to have to take the gate, but Persians flung it wide for him, to yells of "*Zindabad Dick Anthony Shah!*"

He had expected some house-to-house fighting, and dreaded it because he knew it was more horrible than all the other kinds of war; but the streets were thronged with men who cheered for him, and if there were any Russian troops remaining in the city they kept out of view. There was never a king returning from conquest who received a greater ovation or a gladder one than Dick Anthony when he entered Astrabad.

IT WAS not Dick who cut wires, and shut off communication with the world outside, for he wanted the world to know that an Anthony was proving himself by striking for the freedom of a people; it was the Russians, hiding as ever under a cloak of secrecy until they should dare come into the light again, reënforced from the rear, or else regarnished with a brand-new set of lies. Whoever ordered the wires all cut was the man, too, who first sent gallopers with orders to bring back the guns and the regiments that had marched away to hunt Dick through the hills.

"Where is Lancaster?" demanded Dick of every man in the streets who seemed likely to know anything. But none knew. When a Russian arrest is secret, not even the jail-guards know the prisoner's name. It was the man whom Andry had sent with a

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message to Marie Mouquin who sprang out of the crowd to Dick's stirrup and offered to show the way.

He led up a street that passed the palace where the Princess had her quarters; but no Cossack guards did duty by the door now; instead, she and her maid stood on the steps and waved to Dick—and since she was a woman he saluted. But he rode on, though she called to him. The Cossack sentry, pacing back and forth before the one-cell jail, halted, saluted, and surrendered at the sight of Dick's cortege. Dick told a horseman to relieve the man of his rifle and ammunition, and then ordered him to open the jail-gate. But there were no keys and the man professed to have no knowledge of their whereabouts; so Dick let him run.

"Down with the gate!" he commanded, and a battering-ram was devised in thirty seconds. A house-beam, taken from the ruins of a building that the Russians had seen fit to spoil, thundered on the gate until it shattered inward. Dick rode in and fifty followed him. A minute more and the cell-door burst free of its hinges, to show Lancaster blinking his one eye at the unaccustomed light.

"Why did they put you in jail? What did they say?" demanded Dick.

"I don't know! I haven't the very least idea! Nobody has said a word to me that would give me any clue! I was seized—thrown into a cart—and trundled here, and the only man I've seen since is the jailer who brought my food. They have fed me like a dog. But what brought you? Who told you? Why do you take this risk? Man, where do you expect to run to?"

"You were arrested—or I suppose so—because of your connection with myself," said Dick. "Therefore, I am glad to have released you."

"I'll never be able to thank you. I——"

"I know you won't! I don't want your thanks!" said Dick. "I consider you a cur! You left me in the lurch the minute danger showed up in the mountains, when promises to help me, *vi et armis*, had scarcely left your lips. You are free now, and I advise you to ride straight to the British Minister at Teheran! If you feel grateful to me, then tell the Minister exactly who I am!"

"But I don't know who you are! I have only heard you say who you are—I can't take oath as to your identity—I'm a banker—I have to be careful how I swear!"

"So do I," said Dick, "but I swear I'll kick you if you ever cross my path again! Give him a horse, some one! Dismount, you! Yes, you! Give him your horse! Now be off with you!" he ordered, as Lancaster struggled to the saddle and looked round. "Yes—that way lies Teheran!"

There was no need for Dick to waste time visiting the Russian barracks, nor any need for threats; the Persians flocked to him, begging to be given orders. Before Lancaster's back, stooped over the horse's neck, had disappeared, Dick had the situation well in hand; and though his opportunity was limited by time, he made the utmost of it.

"Horses!" he demanded; and they ran to bring all the Russian horses they could find.

"Ammunition!"

The word went round, and they broke down the doors of Russian magazines and piled the contents on Russian wagons.

"Take the rest!" he ordered. "Loot any Russian property you find except what I have ordered brought me. Burn the Russian barracks! Send the horses and ammunition to the plain outside the city!"

Then he led his column through the streets again, past the palace where the Princess and her maid still stood before the door.

"Help!" they screamed. "Help!" And again, since they were women and he a gentleman, he took notice of them, coming to a halt.

"Will you leave us to the mercy of the mob?" asked the Princess.

"Aye! Leave her to the mob!" urged one of Usbeg Ali's seven who commanded the right wing of the horsemen and had ridden to Dick's stirrup to get orders. That reminded Dick of the likelihood that savagery would take charge in Astrabad when he had ridden out.

"Give those two women horses!" he commanded, and men ran to obey. But they came running back, to tell him that the stables were already emptied and the horses on the way toward the city gate. Dick hesitated; and in the minute while he paused to think a message came from Usbeg Ali, hell-clattering through the crowd. A Persian reined a blown horse at his saddle-bow.

"Usbeg Ali says," the man commenced without waiting to salute, "that now is the time to aim the big blow! 'Bid the *bahadur* come!' says Usbeg Ali. 'Bid him ride!' "

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"That settles it!" swore Dick, with a last look at the crowd.

He recognized the certainty of what would happen should he leave the Russian women there. He said nothing but he rode close to the steps and took the Princess underneath the arms. She sprang, and he swung her up in front of him.

"My king!" she murmured, as he wheeled his horse, but he did not seem to hear; he was watching a Persian horseman gather up the maid.

"Forward!" he ordered then; and for the next ten minutes the Princess Olga Karageorgovich was much too busy keeping still and clinging to find breath for words, or brain for choosing them. Dick had the trick, that is born in some men, of conveying some of his own spirit to the horse he rode; so a flashing eye and back-laid ears —tight rein—bared teeth—jaw slugged aside, and a turn of speed that made the other horses struggle to keep up—told any one what Dick's sensations were.

He stopped outside the city long enough to let them bring a mount each for the Princess and her maid. He helped the Princess spring into the other saddle. Then he spoke to her.

"Do you see that hill?" he asked, pointing to the north to where the Atrak River marked the distant boundary of Russia.

"Yes," she said quietly—evidently not expecting what was coming next.

"Ride to it and wait there! Make straight for it if you value your life! Your countrymen—or as many as are left alive of them—will join you there presently! I'm off to round them up! You'll find Russia quite a little distance farther off in that direction!"

She stared hard at him, refusing to believe her senses, but he spurred away from her.

"By troops—to the right—on number one——!" he roared, and in a minute more the long line swung, and swooped to a canter—then a gallop—then, with a roar like a tide-wave, launched itself full pelt—merciless—against the Russians. And the Russians ran. There was only half their number left alive, and they were not in a mood to count the numbers of oncoming cavalry.

Barely had the Princess time to reach the distant mound ahead of them; for she stopped to watch, believing they would form up again and make another stand. They made an effort to retire on the city; but Dick headed them, and then they saw the flames of their own barracks rise above the city wall. It was then that the Princess started after them, and then that the rout began in earnest and they scampered, close-pursued, for the mound that rose behind them on the road to Russia.

Usbeg Ali rode up grinning, to salute Dick and get a word of praise from him.

"That giant of thine is a wonder on the gun, *bahadur!*" he began, since praise is the seed of praise.

"You did well, Usbeg Ali!"

"Sahib, I did my best! Now Astrabad is ours!"

"Persia's!" corrected Dick.

"But the plunder?"

"Is Persia's. I have all the horses and the ammunition. Look!"

"But——"

"Back to the mountains where we came from, Usbeg Ali! We are brigands yet—— not kings! Use the wagons as far as the mountains, then pack the ammunition on horses. Man! There's a Russian army corps to the north of the boundary—two of them, for all we know! D'you want to be caught like a rat in a trap in Astrabad and be blown to pieces by artillery? We've got to move! We've got to keep on moving! Back to the crow's nest, man, where the Persians can gather round us, and the Russians can't penetrate! We're at war with Russia—with the world, for all we know! We're outlaws! Ho, there, Andry! Well laid, sir! Good shooting, man! What? No! Can't help it—the maid's gone with her mistress. We? We're off! Back to the mountains before the Cossack guns and cavalry get back to trouble us! Gather your men! Gather your wounded! We're off again!"

The next adventure of *Dick Anthony of Arran* will appear complete in the next issue

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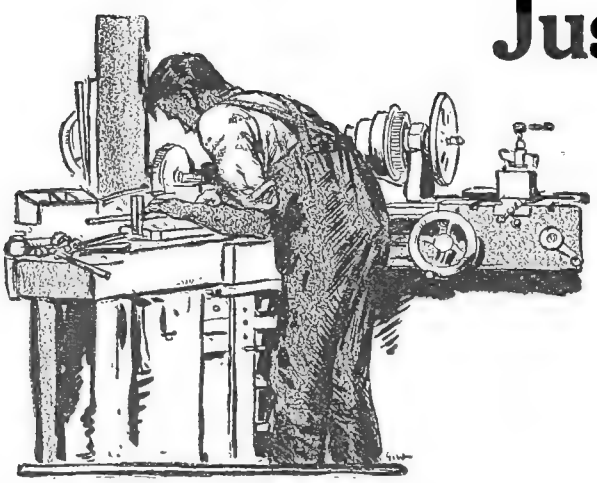
Just Nuts

A Business Adventure

by

Ross Ellis



JOE PETERS ran a bank of automatics for the Grafton Steel Products Company. All day long he fed them with shining bars of cold-drawn steel. These the machines chewed, worried, and presently spat forth again in the form of beautifully accurate nuts. The Union Motor Vehicle Company greatly esteemed these nuts. Their yearly contract was the largest single item in the Grafton Steel Products Company's business.

To Joe Peters this important contract was entrusted. He was a nut specialist. He made nuts by day, he dreamed of them by night. His shopmates called him "Nutty Joe."

He tuned up his automatics until their daily output was far greater than the most enthusiastic machine salesman would have dared promise. Even this did not satisfy him. He dreamed of a machine which would double that output. He fitted up a workshop in the rear of his modest cottage and wired it for power. He spent his evenings bent over a lathe at the old machinists' game of "Cut and Try."

Dreams pursued in this fashion have a way of coming true. When Joe was absolutely sure that the machine would work—not once, but every time—he invited President Grafton to inspect it. He had a vague idea that immediately after the inspection the House of Peters would pass into the plutocratic class.

Big Dave Grafton prided himself on his quick decisions. Ten minutes after he had seen the drawings and the crude working model he made one decision. He would have that machine at any cost.

"Patented?" he questioned.

"Not yet," admitted the inventor.

"Applied for?"

"N-no."

Immediately Big Dave made another decision. He would have that machine—at no cost whatever.

"Leave it to me. My own attorneys will handle it—look out for infringements and all that sort of thing."

"Yes, sir," said Nutty Joe trustfully.

President Grafton carried the drawings away with him that evening, and the next day an auto-truck picked up the model machine. Joe rather hated to see it go. Still, he was glad they were wasting no time. The sooner the machines were built the sooner he would begin being a rich man. He didn't know exactly what arrangement Grafton would make with him. But of course it would be a fair one. And on any fair arrangement he was certain to be rich in mighty short order.

"In less than a year you'll be riding in your own limousine," he told his wife.

Black-eyed little Mattie Peters was inclined to be more pessimistic. Before her marriage she had been a stenographer, and she knew the ways of at least some Captains of Industry.

"I don't like Mr. Grafton's face," she said dubiously. "His eyes are too close together."

"He'll have to treat me square," her

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husband assured her. "The patents will be in my name."

"Will they?" she sniffed. "I doubt it."

Yet, being a dutiful wife, she did not even say, "I told you so" on the fateful day when Nutty Joe came home three hours earlier than his wont, with skinned knuckles and a tale of treachery and wrong.

Instead, she put on her best frock, hustled her husband into his Sunday clothes, and accompanied him to the office of Perry P. Price, attorney and counselor at law.

"Don't you give up, Joey-boy," she cheered him, as they left the elevator. "We'll take that five thousand dollars that father left me and fight 'em to a finish."

Attorney Price was a plump, merry-eyed young man with a fondness for short-cuts. Because of that fondness his standing was high with his clients and low with his professional brethren. While the opposition was patiently plodding along the hallowed Blackstonian cowpaths, the forces captained by P. P. Price would frequently be soaring to victory on the air-ship of his imagination. A forlorn hope was his idea of something to lead. As he listened to the inventor's story, it seemed to him that this case approximated his ideal.

"You haven't a scrap of evidence to show that you invented the machine," he summarized. "Grafton went abroad immediately after you turned over to him your drawings and working model. Shortly thereafter an application for a patent was filed in the name of the Grafton Steel Products Company. When you heard of this you tackled Blaney, the secretary, for a settlement. He disclaimed any knowledge of your interest in the machine.

"Thereupon you lost your temper, pasted Blaney in the eye, and were very properly fired. You have spoiled whatever chance you might have had of any voluntary concessions from the corporation. Anything you get you'll have to fight for—and I couldn't advise a fight through the courts. To a man up a tree it would appear that you are stung."

"I guess I'm stung, all right."

Nutty Joe's broad shoulders drooped and his thin young face looked suddenly worn and old.

"Never mind, Jody," said his wife brightly. "You'll invent a better machine, and go into business for yourself, and——"

"Wait a bit!" interrupted P. P. Price. "Sometimes a case like this can be won out of court. When is Grafton coming back?"

"In about two months."

"I happen to know Dave Grafton very well indeed. He is a man who makes snap decisions. Any one who does that is always open to attack. Now, I have a notion. . . ."

ON THE morning when President Grafton returned from his trip abroad there were trouble and confusion in the private office of the Grafton Steel Products Company. Big Dave, hurriedly summoned to a council of war, sat haunched in his swivel chair, his heavy features set in anxious lines. Dapper little Cyrus Blaney nervously paced the floor, talking excitedly.

"I tell you something must be done!" he shrilled. "Since Peters rented that old Tinsman plant and began to go after business we have not taken a single order where he has been in competition with us. I had Alec Twist go up there and get a job, so as to find out what was going on. Peters fired him in a couple of days; but Alec says——"

"Let him say it to me!"

Big Dave pressed a button on his desk.

"Go down to the machine-shop and send Alec Twist up here," he ordered the office-boy.

Five minutes later a shifty-eyed mechanic pussy-footed into the private office and stood fumbling his oil-stained cap as he glanced from one to the other expectantly.

"Sit down, Twist. Now tell me what you know about the Peters Nut Factory."

Alec Twist eased himself gingerly into a chair and dropped his cap on the floor.

"Old Nutty is mighty sore at you-all. He says you done stole his machine that he invented when he was workin' here, and he allows that he aims to put you-all out of business."

"Never mind that," said Grafton sharply. "What sort of a layout has he?"

"You can't tell what he's got," answered Twist uneasily. "On the ground floor he has half a dozen old Blackhawk automatics; but they are just a blind. It ain't with them that he fills his orders."

"Now listen," interjected the little secretary, "and you'll know what worries me."

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"Upstairs," continued the spy, "nobody knows what's goin' on except the boss and two guys that board up at his house. His office is at the head of the stairs, and there ain't no way to get into the big upper workroom except a door that's right beside his desk. He locks them two fellers in there every mornin', and they don't mix with the other workmen at all. They have some sort of machinery upstairs, 'cause I could hear it, and chutes run down that connect with the stock-bins. A dozen nuts slide down those chutes for every one that is turned off on the automatics on the ground floor. And they are first-class machine-nuts, too."

"Why didn't you invent some excuse to get upstairs and see how he makes those nuts?"

"It can't be did," said the other with a sheepish grin. "I tried it. The best I got was a punch in the jaw, and my time."

"All right, Twist. You may go."

Big Dave turned to Blaney.

"How much did Peters cut under our price on the last order you lost to him?"

"About ten per cent."

"And how close did you figure?"

"Right down to bedrock. I didn't allow a cent of profit. I knew Peters had been asked for a price and I wanted to see if he could meet our costs. Well, I've seen. And I'll tell you what it means. It means that unless we do something to stop him Joe Peters will grab off the Union Motor Vehicle contract that has been the backbone of this business for five years. It means that so far as machine-nuts are concerned we are dead cocks in the pit. It means——"

"It means," interrupted Grafton, "that Nutty Joe has invented another machine that we've got to own. Have you been up there to see him yourself?"

"Well—hardly! Not after the way he acted when he left here. That fellow has a frightful temper."

The President of the Grafton Steel Products Company sniffed contemptuously. He had just made a quick decision, and he was, as usual, pleased with himself.

"Get me the papers on that automatic—all of them."

There was a complacent expression on his broad pink face as he stowed the papers in an inside pocket and stepped from the private office into his waiting auto.

HALF an hour later the car came to a halt before an old building which bore a bright new sign:

THE PETERS NUT FACTORY
"Just Nuts"

Up the stairs puffed Big Dave, and without knocking he pushed open a door marked "Private." Nutty Joe Peters looked up impatiently from some drawings he had been studying. There was a peculiar glint in the blue eyes of the lanky inventor when he recognized the visitor. He rose, half extended his hand, then drew it back.

"I don't quite know whether I ought to shake hands with you or kick you out," he said evenly, "so I'll compromise by asking what the devil you mean by coming here."

"I came to apologize for Blaney." Big Dave seated himself with perfect assurance. "Don't blame me, Joe, for what that muttonhead did or didn't do."

Peters looked at his former employer through half-shut eyes.

"Oh, I guess Blaney wouldn't have gone very far without your sanction," he ventured. "But then, I'm not complaining. This business suits me pretty well."

Grafton glanced toward a door marked "Positively No Admittance" from beyond which came muffled sounds. Among them his trained ear could distinguish the unmistakable click of an automatic machine. He would have given much for a peep at the interior of that mysterious room.

"Now look here, Joe," he protested. "You ought to know I wouldn't be a party to any injustice."

"Yes?" The other's grin was skeptical. "Well, say it was all Blaney's doings if you like. He rooked me out of a good machine—a mighty good machine. But on a three-quarter-inch nut it wastes over a quarter-inch of stock on every cut-off. What do you think of a machine that goes through an inch-and-a-quarter bar and wastes less than a sixteenth?"

Peters hummed a tune.

Grafton's pale eyes bulged. The thing he had just heard sounded impossible. Yet in his pocket was proof of the young inventor's ingenuity.

"Do you mean to tell me," he gasped, "that you have invented such a machine?"

"It's happening in the next room right now," said Peters carelessly. "If Blaney

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had treated me square you folks could have had first chance on anything I invented. As it is, I'm out for my own hand. I guess everybody's satisfied."

President Grafton made another of his lightning decisions. He drew from his pocket a bulky envelope which he extended to his former employee.

"Joe, I reached my office less than two hours ago," he began, striving with moderate success to compose his features in an expression of simple honesty. "My first inquiry was about you. As soon as I discovered the wrong that had been done I took steps to right it. Here are the patent papers covering your machine. They are in the company's name; but I will have them assigned to you today. I want you to come back to us, my boy. We will build your machines for you, relieve you from business cares, give your inventive genius every chance to develop. Forget this miserable misunderstanding and come back to us."

To Grafton's joy the lanky inventor seemed to be considering the proposition. He had not expected signs of yielding so soon. He felt a sense of pride in his persuasive powers.

"Why, I don't know," said Nutty Joe uncertainly, after a long moment. "Since you want to do the square thing I'd like to meet you half way. And it's a fact that I'd feel more at home back in the old shop. This business has worked out just the way I figured it would; but it's a lot of care and responsibility. Still, I've put money in it, and I haven't been running long enough to get it out. I reckon five thousand dollars wouldn't more than——"

"I'll pay you a cash bonus of five thousand dollars to close up this business and come back to us!" cried Big Dave recklessly.

"But this shop is leased for a year."

"I'll take over the lease."

"And I've put a couple of thousand into equipment."

"I'll take it off your hands at what it cost you." Big Dave was jubilant. He felt that he was overcoming the younger man by the sheer force of his personality. "Come on! We'll jump into my car, drive down to my attorney's office, and fix it all up."

"*My* attorney's office," insisted Nutty Joe stubbornly.

"Anywhere you say," agreed President Grafton with a tolerant smile.

PERRY P. PRICE superintended the transference of the patent papers. He drew up a contract covering the employment of Joseph Peters by the Grafton Steel Products Company at double his previous salary, and Grafton wrote a check for seven thousand dollars, which a clerk promptly carried to the bank for certification. The transfer of the lease was arranged.

"Now come on back to your shop," commanded Big Dave impatiently. "I want to look over that equipment I just bought. Even more than that, I want to see that wonderful machine you have invented that enabled you to knock the nut-market galleywest."

Joe Peters looked at him in mild surprise.

"What are you talking about?" he questioned. "I never invented any nut-making machine except this one."

He touched the patent papers which lay on the desk before him.

Grafton laughed derisively.

"Then where did you get all those nuts you have been shipping out? Don't try to fool the old man, my son."

Nutty Joe turned to his attorney.

"You tell him," he urged.

Perry P. Price smiled with the smug satisfaction of a canary-filled cat.

"Prepare for a shock, David," he said. "From the beginning the Peters Nut Factory was just a little experiment in psychology. On my advice Joe invested a few thousand dollars in machine-nuts, which he had shipped in here from the East before he started in business. I thought that the combination of a secret workshop and cut prices might set Blaney's imagination to rambling, and I knew what quick decisions you make, David."

President Grafton dropped heavily into the nearest chair, his face purple.

"But, Joe," he protested weakly, "you *told* me you had a machine that wasted only a sixteenth to a cut."

"So I did," grinned Nutty Joe happily, "but I never said it would make nuts. You have a dozen machines like it in your own shop. I was talking about a little power hack-saw, that is doing everything I said it would at this very minute. But I'm afraid you didn't recognize it from my description. You see, you had been thinking about just nuts until you were——"

"Just 'nuts' myself," groaned Big Dave.

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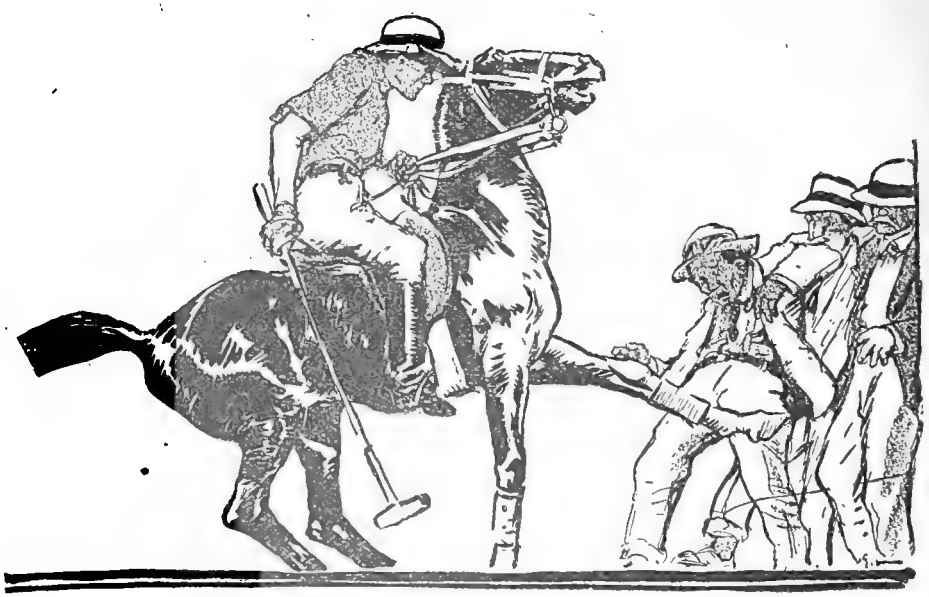

Ivanoff Fights and Rides

by

George Shepherd

ON THE road which leads from Honolulu out to Moanalua a man was riding at a slow, easy trot. He was an odd-looking, yellow-skinned fellow, and except for his black eyes the lack of expression in his face amounted nearly to stupidity. In build he was slender, almost slight.

Looking at him you might have thought him of little account in a rough-and-tumble, or any other situation where mere physical strength was to be considered. For the wide khaki breeches and the loose flannel shirt concealed, and the easy graceful movement with which he rose and fell to the cadence of the hoofbeats did not fully reveal, a body that was as strong, supple and resilient as the most finely tempered steel wire.

I had nearly said that he rode his horse as if he had been molded on it. That would be not merely trite, but also inaccurate. It would give a very poor picture of the supple grace of his seat. Though his legs seemed to cling very softly and gently to the horse's flanks, one got the idea that nothing short of a convulsion of nature—certainly nothing a horse could do—would be able to shake loose their grip. His back was straight, his shoulders square and his whole body seemed to blend itself into the movements of the horse.

But still it was not the man who would be apt to attract the greater attention. It was the horse he rode which made every one he passed turn and look back; and the better they knew and loved fine horses the longer they would stare. Jet black, with legs that were clean and slender and yet showed plenty of power; a well molded barrel, not too long drawn out for short, sharp twistings and turnings, and yet not stocky; a beautifully proportioned neck, and a head which showed intelligence, willingness and a sound disposition—it was a horse that any one might be glad to look at, and much gladder to own.

But there would have been no chance of attaining the happiness of possession; for the horse belonged to Ivanoff, the man who rode it, and he would have been just as

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willing to sell it as you would be, say, to raffle off your wife and children.

The man was nothing but a humble, very ignorant range-rider and general-utility man on Donald MacIntyre's immense ranch over on the neighboring island of Hawaii, but it was he who had been the only one able to win the horse's confidence and break him to the saddle, and it was he who not long before had saved the life of MacIntyre's promised wife with this same horse. So MacIntyre had told Ivanoff that the horse, Gunpowder, should never be ridden by another man. Which, you will admit, was quite as good as any formal legal title to the animal.

This Ivanoff was a very peculiar fellow. He was a descendant of the Yomud Turkomans, those matchless nomad horsemen who for a thousand years or more have ridden over the deserts to the south and west of the Aral Sea. Though he was born in civilized Russia and transplanted to the civilized Hawaiian Islands, the last ten centuries had done nothing for him. His type of mind and point of view were those of his ancestors. Really he belonged to the era of the First Crusade—and on the Saracen side, too. For instance, he firmly believed that MacIntyre owned him as a personal slave; and far from being resentful, he gloried in the fact. His idea was that MacIntyre owned him, he owned the horse Gunpowder, and so, of course, MacIntyre owned the two of them. And it was an open question which he loved more, the horse or his master.

Jogging easily along, Ivanoff swung around a turn in the road and saw some distance ahead of him a Japanese on foot, going in the same direction. At the sound of the hoofs on the hard surface of the road the Jap looked back, and then quickly turned his face around again as if he were startled by what he had seen and did not wish to be recognized. But Ivanoff had the keenness of sight of the desert-born, and the instant's look had been enough. He chuckled to himself and spoke to the horse.

"You see him, my little Gunpowder?" he said. "It is the same man who tried to beat you not long since. And the same who, because I would not let him and gave the beating to him instead, tried to drown me the other morning. Oh, he is a pleasant fellow, that Yamamoto, and loves us both dearly!"

As the horseman drew nearer the Jap edged uneasily over to the side of the road, evidently wishing to give him plenty of room to pass. When he was a few paces behind him, Ivanoff put Gunpowder into a canter. As he went by he leaned out of the saddle and struck Yamamoto in the face with his riding-whip. And as he did so he looked at him and laughed in a way that was the more insulting because it was so unconcerned. Even the lightness of the blow itself—it was a mere tap—showed how insignificant he considered the man.

The Japanese stopped and stood still, watching Ivanoff's back until it disappeared around the next turn in the road; and his face did not look like that of a man to be disregarded. His slant eyes narrowed to mere slits, but the virulent hatred that shot out of them was as evil and malignant as the venom that spurts from the tiny hole in the fang of a cobra. Then the normal blankness returned to his face and he began once more to trudge along the road.

IVANOFF rode on to where the road leads in to the Moanalua polo-field. Here he turned in and in a few minutes reached the stables. With perfect nonchalance and masterly directness he selected the best box-stall, transferred its occupant, and turned Gunpowder into it. Then he groomed the horse, fed and bedded him down for the night; and finally went off in search of his own supper.

In the stables were some forty ponies, the mounts of the two teams who were to play for the polo championship of the islands the next afternoon. One side, the team from the island of Hawaii, was captained by Ivanoff's master, Donald MacIntyre. A few days before their best man had broken his collar-bone and, no other good substitute being available, Ivanoff had been brought over from the ranch to play in his place.

It would be quite impossible to find a simile to describe Ivanoff's feelings at the prospect. He had never dreamed of aspiring to play in a tournament polo-match.

It was not only the sheer joy of playing the most thrilling game that has ever been known that he felt—though you can imagine how great that must have been to a man who thought and dreamed and loved horses as he did. He felt an immeasurable pride that he was to play on a team by the side of, and for the moment as an equal to, his master; and that by his own direct efforts his master might be helped to win. It was an honor beyond his wildest dreams, and with all

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seriousness he felt that he would rather die than fail to be worthy of it.

Ivanoff was a stupid sort of a fellow and quite lacked a sense of proportion.

His supper over and couple of cigarettes smoked in the quickly darkening twilight, Ivanoff made himself a bed of hay at the door of Gunpowder's stall and went to sleep.

It was nearly eleven o'clock when a man with a lantern came along behind the line of stalls. Reaching Ivanoff, he leaned over and shook him cautiously and gently, for among the other grooms and stable-hands he was a man who commanded respect. Instantly Ivanoff was on his feet, wide awake; and his first look was to see that the horse was safe and unmolested.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

The other man, a fellow named Kawelei, from the MacIntyre ranch, held out an envelope.

"A letter from Mr. MacIntyre for you," he said. "It's marked important."

Ivanoff took it and then handed it back.

"Read it to me," he directed.

Kawelei opened and read the letter.

IVANOFF: Come in and see me tonight as soon as you can. Ask for me at Young's Hotel. Don't ride, but walk in as far as the end of the car-line. All of the horses may have to play tomorrow and should be kept fresh. MACINTYRE.

"I go," Ivanoff said when he had finished. "You sleep here and watch Gunpowder."

"All right," Kawelei assented surlily. "Why don't you ride a horse as far as the cars? No one would know."

Ivanoff looked at him scornfully.

"The master, he say walk," he answered.

Ivanoff pulled on his shoes, took a last look at Gunpowder, and then started down the lane which led to the main road. It was a night so black that the darkness could almost be felt—as if it were some heavy, viscous substance which, mixing itself with the very air, lay close over and around and through all things. It seemed to muffle all sound, even.

As Ivanoff followed the path by the feel of the gravel underfoot, his scraping, inquiring footfalls reached his ears faintly. There were no gradations in the shadows. The sky was a vast black dome which blended evenly into the encircling hills.

Ivanoff struck a match to light a cigarette, and its little flare seemed like a conflagration. It blinded him, and it was a minute before he could go on. Finally he came out on the main road. It was wide and well metaled, and far off toward Honolulu he could see a single light which served to give him his direction. He began to swing along at a smart pace, for he felt that the master's business must be urgent.

HE HAD gone almost a mile when suddenly his foot caught in something. He sprawled forward on his hands and knees. Before he could recover himself three men were on his back and clinging to his arms and legs, while a fourth was trussing him up with the same rope as that which had tripped him.

When he was safely bound they rolled him over on his back and gagged him—securely, scientifically and none too gently. This last was hardly necessary, for he was not a man to scream for help—perhaps through stoicism, or perhaps because he realized what he himself would do to an enemy who should cry out inconveniently.

His captors stood up, and out of the darkness came the jeering voice of Yamamoto:

"All right, you Russian man. You like whip me in face, I think. Can do, eh? Bimeby we see, eh?"

Then he felt a stinging blow in his own face and heard the Japanese chuckling.

They picked him up and carried him into the bushes at one side of the road. After beating about for a minute or two they found a path with which they were evidently familiar. Loosing his feet just enough so that he could walk with short, uncertain steps, they led him along this trail, which, as near as he could tell, led straight inland and away from the fringe of houses along the road. Ivanoff counted his steps and tried to remember every turn.

When they had gone nearly two miles they passed through a gate. In another few steps they halted and he could hear one of the men fumbling with the lock of a door. They took him forward again, and it was only from stumbling on the threshold that he could tell when he entered the house. The door was swung shut, and he heard a sound as of securing shutters. Presently one of the men lit a candle.

They were in a bare, unswept room. At one end was the door through which they had come; in each of the two adjoining walls was a single, tightly shuttered window; and at the opposite end an open door seemed

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to lead into another dark, unoccupied room. On the floor against the walls were a few frayed sleeping-mats, a wooden head-rest and a pile of dirty blankets. In the middle of the room stood a low table holding a few unwashed bowls and cups, and fastened to one wall was a wooden cupboard.

Yamamoto lit another candle and went into the next room, apparently to assure himself that it was empty. When he came back he tightened the lashing around Ivanoff's ankles and bound his knees together. Then he hauled him into one corner and dropped him heavily on the floor. Without so much as looking at him after he fell the Jap crossed over to the cupboard, took out a bowl of rice and some bottles of beer and motioned the other three to gather around the table and eat.

IVANOFF never doubted for an instant that he was to be killed. He wondered at first why they had taken the trouble to bring him all this distance to do it, until he remembered that from their point of view it was easier to make him walk on his own feet to a place where his body might be disposed of than to carry his corpse over the same road.

Then, too, perhaps they did not mean to do the business simply and quickly. He faced the prospect with the stoicism of a man whom civilization has not taught to put a high value on individual human life. Then suddenly he thought of the polo-game in which he would not be able to play; and for an instant it was only the gag which kept him from groaning.

To be called on by his master and to fail him! It made little difference that it was through no fault of his. In a matter of service to Donald MacIntyre—and especially in an affair of such overwhelming importance as this—excuses were futile. His master relied on him and he would not be there. To his simple mind nothing could explain or palliate such failure.

Yamamoto and his companions made a comfortable, unhurried meal. Then they began to talk among themselves in Japanese. Fortunately they did not know that Ivanoff, with the linguistic aptitude so often possessed by the illiterate, had acquired a sufficient smattering of the language to understand the most of what they said.

"Shall we attend to him tonight, Yamamoto-san?" one of them asked.

Yamamoto lit a cigarette and took a long puff before he answered deliberately: "No, I think not. Let him enjoy the prospect for a while."

"And the body?" asked another.

"Here, under the floor," replied Yamamoto in the same tone of voice as that with which he would have answered a question as to where he was going to plant his early Spring peas this year. Then he added with a pleasant grin, "Perhaps they may find it in five years."

He smoked for a minute in silence, and the others were still out of deference.

"I would like to have the horse, too," he said when he spoke again. "I would like to take a long whip and beat that devil-horse until it feared me and cowered every time it saw me. Then I would ride it where I pleased—but always with a good whip and sharp spurs."

Over in the corner Ivanoff rolled uneasily from one side to the other, but Yamamoto did not pay any attention to him. "Moji," he went on, "you are an ingenious man. Can you think of any way by which we might get the horse too?"

Moji reflected.

"This man here is in charge of him, and his word is always obeyed in the stables," he said. "A note from him ordering the horse to be turned over to the bearer to be exercised would do the business. Only it might give them a clue to follow up."

"I think I could tangle up that clue," said Yamamoto. "And then by slitting the horse's ears and docking his tail we could change his looks so we could get him off the island. We might starve him for a while, too. That would make a big difference in his appearance."

"Then the only thing is to get the order," said Moji.

"That, too, I can manage," answered Yamamoto. He got up slowly, and walked over to the corner where Ivanoff lay. First kicking the helpless man to insure his attention, he spoke.

"Make listen, you. Sabe write?"

Ivanoff shook his head. Yamamoto was taken aback for a moment.

"But you sabe how sign name—make write just 'Ivanoff'?" he said after a short pause.

Again Ivanoff shook his head.

"You lie," returned Yamamoto calmly. "When I work on MacIntyre ranch I see

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you sign pay-roll one time." Ivanoff made no sign, and Yamamoto went on. "All right. I write note. You sign name. Can do?"

Ivanoff shook his head.

"All right," said Yamamoto cheerfully. "I kill you, sabe? Suppose you sign note, I kill you quick." He made a gesture simulating a single stab in the breast. "Suppose you no sign, I kill slow—very, very, slow." And he drawled his voice out menacingly.

Ivanoff did not move.

"All right? Can do? You sign, eh?" inquired Yamamoto.

Ivanoff shook his head violently.

Yamamoto looked at him with a puzzled expression, as if doubting his refusal. Then he turned and went into the next room. He came back with a brazier full of charcoal. This he lit and nursed into a glow. Taking a short iron bar that served as an extra bolt on the door, he stuck it in the coals; and when the end had turned a faint pink he took it out and carried it over to Ivanoff.

The Jap showed it to him, holding it so close to his face that the heat made Ivanoff blink. Then, baring one of Ivanoff's forearms, he drew the hot iron slowly over the skin. There was a sizzling, a smell of burning flesh, and Ivanoff's lithe body stiffened and his jaws clinched tight on the gag.

Yamamoto arose from his knees and spoke.

"All right. You sign, eh?"

Ivanoff shook his head.

Yamamoto knelt again and turned the sleeve up on the other arm. He held the iron close to it. Then he seemed to change his mind, for he arose and looking down on Ivanoff said with a grin—

"Bimeby more better, I think."

He went back to the others, saying in Japanese:

"If we give him all night to think of it, by morning he should be willing enough. If not we can easily give him some more. Now let us sleep.—Wait a minute," he added. "I forgot something. Moji, get some pepper from the cupboard and put it on the burned place. Then he will be sure to give the matter his attention."

Moji obeyed, and the four men settled themselves on the sleeping-mats about the wall. Ivanoff knew, of course, that men do not sleep more than eight or ten hours at a stretch. All through the night he had to tell himself so. Cramped and aching and with his whole arm on fire, each flickering second seemed a minute, every dragging minute spun into hours. And the hours were limited by no time; each was endless.

When his captors awoke it was still dark in the room. One of them looked cautiously through a curtained peep-hole in a window-shutter, and then, going to the door, threw it open. A flood of sunlight came into the room, revealing all its sordid squalor and filth. After a casual glance at Ivanoff the men drew water from a well outside the house and, rekindling the brazier, made tea. Though from the length of the shadow of the half-open door Ivanoff could tell it was nearly noon, Yamamoto seemed in no hurry to continue the proceedings he had started the night before.

"I have been thinking," he said to the others when he had finished his tea, "that it would be a bad thing if this man here should have dropped anything on the trail as we brought him along. His cap, for instance. It isn't here, yet I think it was on his head when we started with him. We ought to go back and see, before it gets any later."

The others grunted assent. Painstaking attention to details is one of their national traits. Once it was the deciding factor in a not inconsiderable war they fought.

"You stay here and watch him, Moji," directed Yamamoto. "And the rest of us will go back the trail and look. We won't be gone long, and there is always time to finish him. The longer we wait the longer he has to reflect on the pleasant prospect."

Yamamoto and the other two men left, and Moji, first looking to see that Ivanoff's bonds were all secure, settled himself down to wait for them.

THE time dragged. Even to Moji they seemed to be gone a long time. As a matter of fact a change of plan had occurred to Yamamoto. It suddenly struck him that he had exclusive information that a valuable member of the Hawaii team would not be able to play in the match that afternoon. Now if he could bet on the other side before the news became public it would be not only very profitable, but a very neat piece of just the kind of clever finesse that was most dear to his soul. It would give one a certain esthetic satisfaction as well as a return in dollars. It would, all things considered, be much better, and very much safer, than making Ivanoff give him an order for the horse.

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He said as much to his two followers and they enthusiastically agreed. They would all bet, they said. He suggested that they give him their money, and he would go to the polo-grounds and put it up for them. But they demurred. It was better that they all go, they said. They trusted him, of course. Still, they thought they would go along. . . . Ivanoff was safe enough with Moji.

So they kept on to the polo-grounds; and there they experienced some difficulty in finding any one who would take their bets until the crowds began to arrive for the game.

FOR an hour Moji sat impassively in a corner watching his prisoner and smoking cigarettes. Ivanoff, possessed of the vitality of the primitive, uncivilized man, still retained consciousness, lapsing only at intervals into brief periods of torpor. Through all his pain there ran the thought that he was failing his master; that even now MacIntyre must be wondering where he was and why he was not on hand to do his part.

Without him the great game would be lost; and even if he should escape by some miracle, his master would never trust him again. That MacIntyre would be more concerned about his servant's fate than a thousand polo-games never entered his head. His master was a great man; he, Ivanoff, was of importance only when he could serve him; and now, in a crisis, he was failing him. Such was Ivanoff's reasoning. He was a very stupid, medieval sort of a fellow.

Moji got up, yawned, stretched himself, and then took a drink of *sake* from a bottle in the cupboard. Fifteen minutes later he took another drink; after a few minutes more a third. Presently he began to feel sleepy. He tried to settle down on the heap of blankets, but seemed unable to dispose himself comfortably. He got up, locked the door and went into the next room. A creaking of springs told Ivanoff that the other had lain down on a bed. Before long he could hear Moji's snores.

Added to the intolerable smarting of his burned arm, the aches and cramps which came from the lashings around his knees, ankles, wrists and elbows and the choking pain of the gag, Ivanoff had a consuming thirst. Near the table stood a pail half full of water. He thought that if he got his head in it he might be able to suck some into his mouth in spite of the gag.

Very slowly and carefully he rolled over to it. Awkwardly he tried to raise his head and put it over the bucket. Instead of succeeding he slipped, rolled back on one side and upset the charcoal brazier which stood close by. The red-hot coals scattered over the floor and began to burn into the planks. For a minute Ivanoff lay quite still.

Then he raised himself on his knees and, leaning over, held his pinioned wrists over the nearest smoking coal. He bore down; and though it scorched the flesh he did not wince, for slowly the smoldering fire ate through the cord. When his hands were free it was minutes before he could use them. Finally he was able to fumble at the knots of his other lashings. It was a tedious process, but at last he had them all off and the gag out of his mouth. He took a long drink and then lay on his back and flexed his legs many times before he dared stand up. When he did, it was to look on the sleepy face of Moji standing in the open door.

As soon as the astonished Jap realized that the prisoner was unbound and a man to be reckoned with he darted back in the other room for a weapon. Ivanoff with an empty basin scraped up the coals which were still hot and put them in the brazier. When Moji reappeared in the door with a knife in his hand, brazier and coals struck him full in the face. Before the screaming Jap had collected his senses Ivanoff was out of the door and far down the path.

A BIG touring-car slid rapidly along the road to Moanalua. In it were the Governor of the Territory of Hawaii, the General commanding the Department, the Admiral of the Pacific Fleet, and two lesser dignitaries. They were on their way to see the polo-match, and all of them were a trifle impatient at the prospect of being a few minutes late.

A little ahead of them a man popped out of the bushes at the side of the road and, looking around, sighted the swiftly approaching car. Immediately he planted himself in the exact center of the road and waved his arms violently. The driver, thinking it meant some obstruction in front, threw on his emergency brake and brought the car to a stop with a jolt that came near to intermingling civil, military, naval and lesser dignity in one heap on the floor.

Ivanoff jumped on the running-board and motioned the driver to proceed.

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"All right," he said. "I go Moanalua. Quick."

The driver, not knowing whether the man was drunk or merely crazy, was about to push him off when the Governor restrained him.

"Wait a minute. Let's see what's the matter," he said. "What do you want?" he asked Ivanoff.

"I go Moanalua. Play polo. Plenty hurry," was the response.

The Governor eyed him curiously. He did not look much like a contestant in a tournament polo-match; nor was he drunk, nor yet crazy.

"Bosh!" said the Governor. "Who are you?"

"I belong Mr. MacIntyre," answered Ivanoff with dignity.

"Now that I think of it," put in the General, "I believe MacIntyre is going to play some sort of a native today. Maybe he's the man."

"Well," said the Governor, "he's got no business out here, but I don't suppose it will hurt to take him along. Jump in front there," he ordered Ivanoff.

OUT at the polo-grounds, while the grooms were leading about the horses, saddled and ready, and the waiting crowds were growing more impatient each minute, Donald MacIntyre was haranguing the other men of his team.

"I tell you, he's *not* gone off on a drunk!" he said angrily. "Just because that worthless Kawelei was found soused and senseless in a Jap drinking-joint, it's no proof that Ivanoff has done the same thing. I don't know where he is nor what has become of him. But I do know that I've never yet depended on him and had him disappoint me. He isn't that kind, I tell you.

"Now we're going to wait ten minutes more, and if he doesn't turn up by then I'll eat my saddle and bridle." He turned to his younger brother, standing by—booted, spurred and pink-silk-shirted. "And then, Jim, you'll have to go in in his place, and pray to the Lord that you play somewhere near one half the game that Russian can. And if you don't——"

He was interrupted by a loud honking as the Governor's car rolled slowly up. Without waiting for it to stop, Ivanoff hopped out and came running toward the group.

"Thank the Lord, Ivanoff!" exclaimed MacIntyre. Then he took in his servant's disheveled, haggard appearance. "What's the matter?" he asked quickly. "Are you all right? Can you play?"

Ivanoff, for all his eagerness, had a fund of sound common sense. "Make eat first," he announced, feeling his stomach wistfully and tenderly. "Five minutes, all right. Can play, master."

MacIntyre was a person of quick intuition, and he knew his man. If Ivanoff wanted to delay the game to eat, it was only because he needed food before he could play. So he flung himself on the nearest horse, galloped across the field, threaded his way through the motor-cars, parked on the other side, and charged up the hill to the tea-booth. Without even dismounting, he grabbed the first basket of sandwiches he saw and galloped back to Ivanoff with it.

"Here you are. Go to it," he said.

Ivanoff plunged both grimy fists into the basket and began stuffing himself, first with one hand and then the other. Between bites he issued instructions to one of the grooms.

"Bring my new shirt from the bunk-house—the pink silk one. Bring breeches, boots, everything; and quick," he ordered. "I put 'em on here," he explained, with magnificent disregard for the foolish conventions of civilization. Then he spoke to MacIntyre. "Gunpowder, he all right, master?" he asked.

"Fine as silk, Ivanoff," MacIntyre assured him.

Five minutes later Ivanoff settled himself happily in his saddle and, riding beside his master, cantered out to the center of the field. Yamamoto, who saw him from the back of the crowd, started to run back to the house to see what had happened. Then he remembered the two hundred dollars he had bet on the game. Ivanoff had escaped, but two hundred dollars was two hundred dollars, and was not to be abandoned for a fruitless investigation of the affair. If he stayed on the outskirts of the crowd, he thought, Ivanoff would not see him as long as he was playing.

After the first period the tactics of the Hawaii team were violently altered. "Play your game around Ivanoff," MacIntyre told them. Ivanoff himself in the stress of the wild excitement had promptly forgotten all the principles of team-play which had been so painstakingly drummed into him.

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But he rode like the wind, hit like a fiend and had an almost uncanny way of always being where the ball was.

He risked his neck a dozen times a minute, and covered more ground than any two men on the field. That he did not clout his opponents on the head with his mallet or throw them from their horses was due to no instinct of sportsmanship; that was a quality quite unknown at the time of the First Crusade—on the Saracen side of the question. It was only because his master told him he must not.

The game was close and the advantage kept shifting from one side to the other. At the end of the seventh period the score was three goals all. The eighth and last period began with a rush. Each team went in determined to break down the other's defense. They rode their best ponies, and so furious was the pace that all team-work went to the wind. And so evenly matched were they when it came to sheer speed and recklessness that it seemed certain that there would be no more scoring.

A minute before time was up the ball was only fifty feet in front of the Hawaii goal, lost in a tangle of swiftly moving ponies' legs and swinging mallets. The eight riders milled around and wove in and out, all vainly trying to clear for a stroke. Presently Ivanoff saw the ball just in front of him. He rode over it toward his own goal and tried to give it a back-hand stroke, but an Oahu man hooked his mallet. Ivanoff disengaged it, slid back over Gunpowder's haunches almost to his tail, and, reaching far behind him, caught the ball a flick which sent it fifty feet clear of the mêlée.

The instant he heard the click of the mallet-head on the ball, and before he was back in the saddle, he swung the horse around on his hind feet and was after it. How he kept his seat no one of the thousands who were watching could tell. Three Oahu men were after it too, but Ivanoff had started first. He reached it first.

A good full-arm swing this time, a clean, sharp crack of wood striking wood, and the ball sailed toward the Oahu goal. The same instant Ivanoff told Gunpowder that now indeed he must run—run as he had never run before in his life. And the horse obeyed him.

Down the field he raced after the flying ball, the thudding of his hoofbeats on the dry turf almost blending into a single continuous note, and with every jump drawing farther away from the others. In the middle of the field he caught up with the still swiftly moving ball. At such terrific speed the best player in the world might have missed; but Ivanoff achieved another clean stroke, and again the ball sailed through the air ahead of him.

Fifty yards in front of the Oahu goal he reached it once more. He was yards ahead of his nearest pursuer, and an experienced man would have slowed up to make sure of his shot. But not so Ivanoff. He called on Gunpowder for a last burst of speed and, swinging with all his strength, he drove the ball square through the goal-posts and far over the fence beyond. And as he did he let out a wild, shrill war-cry that echoed back from the distant hills until it was lost in the cheering of the spectators and the honking of a hundred automobile-horns.

THE game was won, but there were still a few seconds to play. When the ball was thrown in, an Oahu man knocked it to one side of the field, where it went out of bounds. But Ivanoff had already started after it at top speed, and when he came to the side boards he could not check his horse. The crowd of spectators who had been edging forward in the last few minutes of the game quickly scattered before him and he went plunging through the opening.

In front of him, just a little to one side, he saw Yamamoto, getting out of the way barely in time. Ivanoff held his bridle-hand steady, and not a soul in the crowd could see or suspect the pressure of one knee, which made the horse swerve ever so slightly—just enough so that Yamamoto went down under the hoofs.

They took the Jap to the hospital, and eventually he was patched up after a fashion, and discharged; which did not worry Ivanoff in the least. In the days of the First Crusade, having blood enemies at large did not make men lie awake nights—especially the Saracens.

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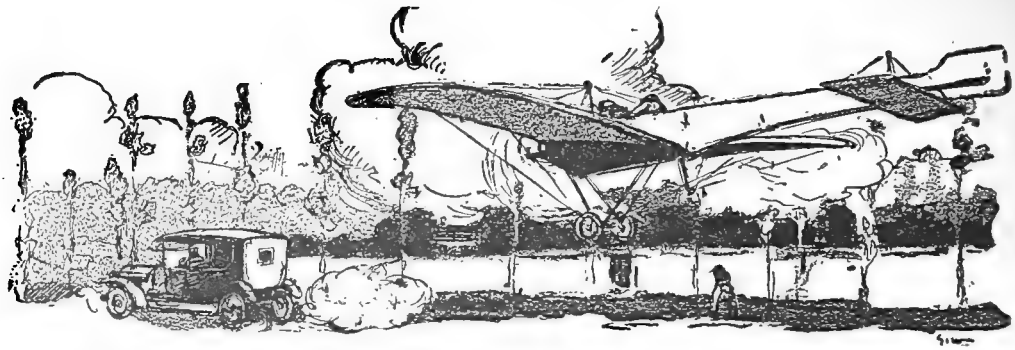

Arsène Lupin— And the Tiger's Teeth

by Maurice Leblanc

(*Conclusion*)

SYNOPSIS—*Cosmo Mornington*, poisoned in Paris, has willed 100,000,000 francs to any French cousin or cousin's child in the order of kinship. If none be found within three months, the bequest goes to *Don Luis Perenna*, a Spanish-Peruvian, late of the French Foreign Legion serving in Morocco. Perenna is to hunt up the heirs himself. It is generally understood that Perenna is *Arsène Lupin*, but no action can be taken against him for his former misdeeds, owing to the fact that he has tricked the authorities into officially pronouncing Lupin dead.

At once the heirs are picked off one by one. *Hippolyte Fauville*, next of kin, becomes crazed with jealousy of his wife Marie, who is waiting for his death to marry *Gaston Sauverand*. Fauville poisons his son *Edmond* and commits suicide in such a way as to lay Marie under the suspicion of having committed a double murder, with Sauverand as her accomplice. Fauville, Marie, and Sauverand are all cousins, and as such are Mornington inheritors.

Perenna makes all this clear. Some points, however, he can not explain. What about the "Tiger's Teeth"—those mysterious tooth-marks which are identical with Marie Fauville's, which clinched the case against Marie, yet which she did not make?

Again, what about the memoranda bearing on future developments of the mystery—memoranda which were verified by later events? They seemed to show that *Florence Levasseur*, Perenna's secretary-housekeeper and stanch friend of Marie and Sauverand, had a guilty knowledge, for they were found in her room. But this suspicion Perenna, who secretly loves Florence, can not entertain.

Behind all this tangle of blood and hate, Perenna senses the operations of a directing mind. Who poisoned Mornington? Who egged on Fauville? Who smuggled poison to Marie in prison, with which to kill herself? Who sent word to Sauverand that Marie was dead—news which incited him to suicide? Who wrote Perenna, warning him to cease working on the mystery? Who but the some one that will benefit by the elimination of all other heirs?

The three months are up. The Mornington executors are assembled in the office of *M. Desmalions*, Prefect of Police. Don Luis, residuary legatee, stands to get the hundred million. If no other heirs appear he will be arrested as the actuator of these many deaths. He asserts that the real beneficiary will appear.

Enter an office messenger with a visitor's card and a letter.

CHAPTER XVIII

WEBER TAKES HIS REVENGE

THE moment he had read the first lines, M. Desmalions looked up and, addressing Don Luis, murmured:

"You were right, monsieur. This is a claim."

"On whose part, Monsieur le Préfet?" Don Luis could not help asking.

M. Desmalions did not reply. He finished reading the letter. Then he read it again, with the attention of a man weighing every word. Lastly he read aloud:

MONSIEUR LE PRÉFET:

A chance correspondence has revealed to me the existence of an unknown heir of the Roussel family. It was only today that I was able to procure the documents necessary for identifying this heir; and, owing to unforeseen obstacles, it is only at the last moment that I am able to send them to you *by the person whom they concern.* Respecting a secret which is not mine and wishing, as a woman, to remain outside a business in which I have been only accidentally involved, I beg you, Monsieur le Préfet, to excuse me if I do not feel called upon to sign my name to this letter.

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So Perenna had seen rightly and events were justifying his forecast. Some one was putting in an appearance within the period indicated. The claim was made in good time. And the very way in which things were happening at the exact moment was curiously suggestive of the mechanical exactness that had governed the whole business.

The last question still remained; who was this unknown person, the possible heir and therefore the five- or six-fold murderer? He was waiting in the next room. There was nothing but a wall between him and the others. He was coming in. They would see him. They would know who he was.

The Prefect suddenly rang the bell.

A few tense seconds elapsed. Oddly enough, M. Desmalions did not remove his eyes from Perenna. Don Luis remained quite master of himself, but restless and uneasy at heart.

The door opened. The messenger showed some one in.

It was Florence Levasseur.

DON LUIS was for one moment amazed. Florence Levasseur here! Florence, whom he had left in the train bound for Rouen under the supervision of Detective Sergeant Mazeroux and for whom it was physically impossible to be back in Paris before eight o'clock in the evening!

Then, despite his bewilderment, he at once understood. Florence, knowing that she was being followed, had drawn them after her to the Gare Saint-Lazare and simply walked through the railway carriage, getting out on the other platform, while the worthy Mazeroux went on in the train to keep his eye on the traveler who was not there.

But suddenly the full horror of the situation struck him. Florence was here to claim the inheritance; and her claim, as he himself had said, was a proof of the most terrible guilt.

Acting on an irresistible impulse, Don Luis leaped to the girl's side, seized her by the arm and said with almost malevolent force:

"What are you doing here? What have you come for? Why did you not let me know?"

M. Desmalions stepped between them. But Don Luis, without letting go of the girl's arm, exclaimed:

"Oh, Monsieur le Préfet, don't you see that this is all a mistake? The person whom we are expecting, about whom I told you, is not this one. The other is keeping in the background, as usual. Why, it's impossible that Florence Levasseur——"

"I have no preconceived opinion on the subject of this young lady," said the Prefect of Police in an authoritative voice. "But it is my duty to question her about the circumstances that brought her here; and I shall certainly do so."

He released the girl from Don Luis' grasp and made her take a seat. He himself sat down at his desk; and it was easy to see how great an impression the girl's presence made upon him. It afforded so to speak an illustration of Don Luis' argument.

The appearance on the scene of a new person, laying claim to the inheritance, was undeniably, to any logical mind, the appearance on the scene of a criminal who herself brought with her the proofs of her crimes. Don Luis felt this clearly and, from that moment, did not take his eyes off the Prefect of Police.

Florence looked at them by turns as if the whole thing were the most insoluble mystery to her. Her beautiful dark eyes retained their customary serenity. She no longer wore her nurse's uniform; and her gray gown, very simply cut and devoid of ornaments, showed her graceful figure. She was grave and unemotional as usual.

M. Desmalions said—

"Explain yourself, mademoiselle."

She answered:

"I have nothing to explain, Monsieur le Préfet. I have come to you on an errand which I am fulfilling without knowing exactly what it is about."

"What do you mean? 'Without knowing what it is about'?"

"I will tell you, Monsieur le Préfet. Some one in whom I have every confidence and for whom I entertain the greatest respect asked me to hand you certain papers. They appear to concern the question which is the object of your meeting today."

"The question of awarding the Morington inheritance?"

"Yes."

"You know that, if this claim had not been made in the course of the present sitting, it would have had no effect at all?"

"I came as soon as the papers were handed to me."

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"Why were they not handed to you an hour or two earlier?"

"I was not there. I had to leave the house where I am staying in a hurry."

Perenna did not doubt that it was his intervention that upset the enemy's plans by causing Florence to take to flight.

The Prefect continued—

"So you are ignorant of the reasons why you received the papers?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Préfet."

"And evidently you are also ignorant of how far they concern you."

"They do not concern me, Monsieur le Préfet."

M. Desmalions smiled and, looking into Florence's eyes, said plainly:

"According to the letter that accompanies them they concern you intimately. It seems that they prove, in the most positive manner, that you are descended from the Roussel family and that you consequently have every right to the Mornington inheritance."

"I!"

The cry was a spontaneous exclamation of astonishment and protest.

And she at once went on insistently:

"I, a right to the inheritance! I have none at all, Monsieur le Préfet, none at all. I never knew Mr. Mornington. What is this story? There is some mistake."

She spoke with great animation and with an apparent frankness that would have impressed any other man than the Prefect of Police. But how could he forget Don Luis' arguments and the accusation made beforehand against the person who would arrive at the meeting?

"Give me the papers," he said.

She took from her handbag a blue envelope which was not fastened down and which he found to contain a number of faded documents, damaged at the folds and torn in different places.

He examined them amid perfect silence, read them through, studied them thoroughly, inspected the signatures and the seals through a magnifying-glass and said:

"They bear every sign of being genuine. The seals are official."

"Then, Monsieur le Préfet . . . ?" said Florence in a trembling voice.

"Then, mademoiselle, let me tell you that your ignorance strikes me as most incredible."

And, turning to the solicitor, he said:

"Listen briefly to what these documents contain and prove. Gaston Sauverand, Cosmo Mornington's heir in the fourth line, had, as you know, an elder brother, called Raoul, who lived in the Argentine Republic. This brother, before his death, sent to Europe, in the charge of an old nurse, a child of five who was none other than his daughter, a natural but legally recognized daughter whom he had had by Mlle. Levasseur, a French teacher at Buenos Aires.

"Here is the birth-certificate. Here is the signed declaration written entirely in the father's hand. Here is the affidavit signed by the old nurse. Here are the depositions of three friends, merchants or solicitors at Buenos Aires. And here are the death-certificates of the father and mother.

"All these documents have been legalized and bear the seals of the French Consulate. For the present, I have no reason to doubt them; and I am bound to look upon Florence Levasseur as Raoul Sauverand's daughter and Gaston Sauverand's niece."

"Gaston Sauverand's niece? . . . His niece?" stammered Florence.

The mention of a father whom she had, so to speak, never known, left her unmoved. But she began to weep at the recollection of Gaston Sauverand, whom she loved so fondly and to whom she found herself linked by such a close relationship.

Were her tears sincere? Or were they the tears of an actress able to play her part down to the slightest details? Were those facts really revealed to her for the first time? Or was she acting the emotions which the revelation of those facts would produce in her under natural conditions?

DON LUIS observed M. Desmalions even more narrowly than he did the girl and tried to read the secret thoughts of the man with whom the decision lay. And suddenly he became certain that Florence's arrest was a matter resolved upon as definitely as the arrest of the most monstrous criminal. Then he went up to her and said—

"Florence."

She looked at him with her tear-dimmed eyes and made no reply.

Slowly he said:

"To defend yourself, Florence — for, though I am sure you do not know it, you are under that obligation—you must

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understand the terrible position in which events have placed you.

"Florence, the Prefect of Police has been led by the logical outcome of those events to come to the final conclusion that the person entering this room with an evident claim to the inheritance is the person who killed the Mornington heirs. You entered the room, Florence, and you are undoubtedly Cosmo Mornington's heiress."

He saw her shake from head to foot and turn as pale as death. Nevertheless she uttered no word and made no gesture of protest.

He went on:

"It is a formal accusation. Do you say nothing in reply?"

She waited some time and then declared:

"I have nothing to say. The whole thing is a mystery. What would you have me reply? I do not understand!"

Don Luis stood quivering with anguish in front of her. He stammered:

"Is that all? Do you accept?"

After a second she said in an undertone:

"Explain yourself, I beg of you. What you mean, I suppose, is that, if I do not reply, I accept the accusation?"

"Yes."

"And then?"

"Arrest . . . prison——"

"Prison!"

She seemed to be suffering hideously. Her beautiful features were distorted with fear. To her mind, prison evidently represented the torments undergone by Marie and Sauverand. It must mean despair, shame, death, all those horrors which Marie and Sauverand had been unable to avoid and of which she in her turn would become the victim.

An awful sense of hopelessness overcame her; and she moaned:

"How tired I am! I feel that there is nothing to be done! I am stifled by the mystery around me! Oh, if I could only see and understand!"

There was another long pause. Leaning over her, M. Desmalions studied her face with concentrated attention. Then, as she did speak, he put his hand to the bell on his table and struck it three times.

Don Luis did not stir from where he stood, with his eyes despairingly fixed on Florence. A battle was raging within him between his love and generosity, which led him to believe the girl, and his reason, which obliged him to suspect her. Was she innocent or guilty? He did not know. Everything was against her. And yet why had he never ceased to love her?

Deputy Chief Detective Weber entered, followed by his men. M. Desmalions spoke to him and pointed to Florence. Weber went up to her.

"Florence!" said Don Luis.

She looked at him and looked at Weber and his men; and, suddenly, realizing what was coming, she retreated, staggered for a moment, bewildered and fainting, and fell back in Don Luis' arms.

"Oh, save me, save me, do save me!"

The action was so natural and unconstrained, the cry of distress so clearly denoted the alarm which only the innocent can feel, that Don Luis was promptly convinced. A fervent belief in her lightened his heart. His doubts, his caution, his hesitation, his anguish—all these vanished before a certainty that dashed upon him like an irresistible wave. And he cried:

"No, no, that must not be! Monsieur le Préfet, there are things that can not be permitted——"

He stooped over Florence, whom he was holding so firmly in his arms that nobody could have taken her from him. Their eyes met. His face was close to the girl's. He quivered with emotion at feeling her throbbing, so weak, so utterly helpless; and he said to her passionately, in a voice too low for any but her to hear:

"I love you, I love you. . . . Ah, Florence, if you only knew what I feel—how I suffer and how happy I am! . . . Oh, Florence, I love you, I love you——"

WEBER had stood aside, at a sign from the Prefect, who wanted to witness the unexpected conflict between those two mysterious beings, Don Luis Perenna and Florence Levasseur.

Don Luis unloosed his arms and placed the girl in a chair. Then, putting his two hands on her shoulders, face to face with her, he said:

"Though you do not understand, Florence, I am beginning to understand a good deal; and I can already almost see my way in the mystery that terrifies you. Florence, listen to me. It is not you who are doing all this, is it? There is somebody else behind you, above you . . . somebody who

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gives you your instructions, isn't there, while you yourself don't know where he is leading you?"

"Nobody is instructing me. What do you mean? Explain."

"Yes, you are not alone in your life. There are many things which you do because you are told to do them and because you think them right and because you do not know their consequences or even that they can have any consequences. Answer my question: are you absolutely free? Are you not yielding to some influence?"

The girl seemed to have come to herself; and her face recovered some of its usual calmness. Nevertheless, it seemed as if Don Luis' question made an impression on her.

"No," she said, "there is no influence . . . none at all . . . I'm sure of it."

He insisted, with growing eagerness:

"No, you are not sure; don't say that. Some one is dominating you without your knowing it. Think for a moment. You are Cosmo Mornington's heiress, the heiress to a fortune which you don't care about, I know, I swear. Well, if you don't want that fortune, to whom will it belong? Answer me! Is there any one who is interested or believes himself interested in seeing you rich? The whole question lies in that. Is your life linked with that of some one else? Is he a friend of yours? Are you engaged to him?"

She gave a start of revolt.

"Oh, never! The man of whom you speak is incapable——"

"Ah," he cried, overcome with jealousy, "you confess it! So the man of whom I speak exists! I swear that the villain——"

He turned toward M. Desmalions, his face convulsed with hatred. He made no further effort to contain himself.

"Monsieur le Préfet, we are in sight of the goal! I know the road that will lead us to it. The wild beast shall be hunted down tonight, or tomorrow at least. Monsieur le Préfet, the letter that accompanied those documents, the unsigned letter which this young lady handed you, was written by the Mother Superior who manages a nursing-home in the Avenue des Ternes.

"By making immediate inquiries at that nursing-home, by questioning the Superior and confronting her with Mlle. Levasseur, we shall discover the identity of the criminal himself. But we must not lose a minute, or we shall be too late and the wild beast will have fled."

His outburst was irresistible. There was no fighting against the violence of his conviction. Still, M. Desmalions objected.

"Mlle. Levasseur could tell us——"

"She will not speak, or at least not till later, when the man has been unmasked in her presence. Monsieur le Préfet, I entreat you to have the same confidence in me as before. Have not all my promises been fulfilled? Have confidence, Monsieur le Préfet; cast aside your doubts. Remember how Marie Fauville and Gaston Sauverand were overwhelmed with charges, the most serious charges, and how they succumbed in spite of their innocence.

"Does the law wish to see Florence Levasseur sacrificed as the two others were? And besides, what I ask for is not her release, but the means to defend her . . . that is to say, an hour or two's delay. Let Deputy Chief Weber be responsible for her safe custody. Let your detectives go with us; these and more as well, for we can not have too many to capture the loathsome brute in his lair."

M. Desmalions did not reply. After a brief moment, he took Weber aside and talked to him for some minutes. M. Desmalions did not seem very favorably disposed toward Don Luis' request. But Weber was heard to say:

"You need have no fear, Monsieur le Préfet. We run no risk."

And M. Desmalions yielded.

A few moments later, Don Luis Perenna and Florence Levasseur took their seats in a motor-car with Weber and two inspectors. Another car, filled with detectives, followed.

THE hospital was literally invested by the police forces and Weber neglected none of the precautions of a regular siege.

The Prefect of Police, who arrived in his own car, was shown by the man servant into the waiting-room and then into the parlor, where the Mother Superior came to him at once. Without delay or preamble of any sort, he put his questions to her, in the presence of Don Luis, Weber and Florence.

"Reverend Mother," he said, "I have a letter here which was brought to me at headquarters and which tells me of the existence of certain documents concerning a legacy. According to my information this

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letter, which is unsigned and which is in a disguised hand, was written by you. Is that so?"

The Mother Superior, a woman with a powerful face and a determined air, replied without embarrassment:

"That is so, Monsieur le Préfet. As I had the honor to tell you in my letter, I would have preferred, for obvious reasons, that my name should not be mentioned. Besides, the delivery of the documents was all that mattered. However, since you know that I am the writer, I am prepared to answer your questions."

M. Desmalions continued, with a glance at Florence:

"I will first ask you, Reverend Mother, if you know this young lady?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Préfet. Florence was with us for six months as a nurse, a few years ago. She gave such satisfaction that I was glad to take her back this day fortnight. As I had read her story in the papers, I simply asked her to change her name. We had a new staff at the hospital, and it was therefore a safe refuge for her."

"But, as you have read the papers, you must be aware of the accusations against her?"

"Those accusations have no weight, Monsieur le Préfet, with any one who knows Florence. She has one of the noblest characters and one of the strictest consciences that I have ever met with."

The Prefect continued:

"Let us speak of the documents, Reverend Mother. Where do they come from?"

"Yesterday, Monsieur le Préfet, I found in my room a communication in which the writer proposed to send me some papers that interested Florence Levasseur. . . ."

"How did any one know that she was here?" asked M. Desmalions, interrupting her.

"I can't tell you. The letter simply said that the papers would be at Versailles, at the general delivery, in my name, on a certain day; that is to say, this morning. I was also asked not to mention them to anybody and to hand them at three o'clock this afternoon to Florence Levasseur, with instructions to take them to the Prefect of Police at once. I was also requested to have a letter conveyed to Sergeant Mazeroux."

"To Sergeant Mazeroux! That's odd."

"That letter appeared to have to do with the same business. Now I am very fond of Florence. So I sent the letter and this morning went to Versailles and found the papers there, as stated. When I got back, Florence was out. I was not able to hand them to her until her return, at about four o'clock."

"Where were the papers posted?"

"In Paris. The post-mark on the envelope was that of the Avenue Niel, which happens to be the nearest office to this."

"And did not the fact of finding that letter in your room strike you as strange?"

"Certainly, Monsieur le Préfet, but no stranger than all the other incidents in the matter."

"Nevertheless," continued M. Desmalions, who was watching Florence's pale face, "nevertheless, when you saw that the instructions which you received came from this house and that they concerned a person living in this house, did you not entertain the idea that that person——"

"The idea that Florence had entered the room, unknown to me, for such a purpose?" cried the Superior. "Oh, Monsieur le Préfet, Florence is incapable of doing such a thing!"

The girl was silent; but her drawn features betrayed the feelings of alarm that upset her.

Don Luis went up to her and said:

"The mystery is clearing, Florence, isn't it? And you are suffering in consequence. Who put the letter in Mother Superior's room? You know, don't you? And you know who is conducting all this plot?"

She did not answer. Then, turning to the deputy chief, the Prefect said—

"Weber, please go and search the room which Mlle. Levasseur occupied."

And, in reply to the nun's protest—

"It is indispensable," he declared, "that we should know the reasons why Mlle. Levasseur preserves such an obstinate silence."

Florence herself led the way. But as Weber was leaving the room, Don Luis exclaimed—

"Take care, deputy chief!"

"Take care? Why?"

"I don't know," said Don Luis, who really could not have said why Florence's behavior was making him uneasy. "I don't know. Still, I warn you——"

Weber shrugged his shoulders and, accompanied by the Superior, moved away. In the hall he took two men with him. Florence walked ahead. She went up a

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flight of stairs and turned down a long corridor, with rooms on either side of it, which, after turning a corner, led to a short and very narrow passage ending in a door.

This was her room. The door opened not inward, into the room, but outward, into the passage. Florence therefore drew it to her, stepping back as she did so, thus obliging Weber to do likewise. She took advantage of this to rush in and close the door behind her so quickly that the deputy chief, when he tried to grasp the handle, merely struck the air.

He made an angry gesture.

"The hussy! She means to burn some papers!"

And, turning to the Superior—

"Is there another exit to the room?"

"No, monsieur."

He tried to open the door, but she had locked and bolted it. Then he stood aside to make way for one of his men, a giant who, with one blow of his fist, smashed a panel.

Weber pushed by him, put his arm through the opening, drew the bolt, turned the key, pulled open the door and entered.

Florence was no longer in her room. A little open window opposite showed the way she had taken.

"Oh, curse my luck!" he shouted. "She's run off!"

And, hurrying back to the staircase, he roared over the balustrade:

"Watch all the doors! She's got away! Collar her!"

M. Desmalions came hurrying up. Meeting the deputy, he received his explanations and then went on to Florence's room. The open window looked out on a small inner yard, a sort of well which served to ventilate a part of the house. Some rain-pipes ran down the wall. Florence must have let herself down by them. But what coolness and what an indomitable will she must have displayed to make her escape in this manner!

The detectives had already distributed themselves on every side to bar the fugitive's road. It soon became manifest that Florence, for whom they were hunting on the ground-floor and in the basement, had gone from the yard into the room underneath her own, which happened to be the Mother Superior's; that she had put on a nun's habit; and that, thus disguised, she had passed unnoticed through the very men who were pursuing her.

They rushed outside. But it was now dark; and every search was bound to be vain in so populous a quarter.

The Prefect of Police made no effort to conceal his displeasure. Don Luis was also greatly disappointed at this flight, which thwarted his plans, and enlarged openly upon Weber's lack of skill.

"I told you so, deputy chief! You should have taken your precautions. Mlle. Levasseur's attitude ought to have warned you. She evidently knows the criminal and wanted to go to him, ask him for explanations and, for all we can tell, save him, if he managed to convince her. And what will happen between them? When the villain sees that he is discovered, he will be capable of anything."

M. Desmalions again questioned the Mother Superior and soon learned that Florence, before taking refuge in the nursing-home, had spent forty-eight hours in some furnished apartments on the Ile Saint-Louis.

The clue was not worth much; but they could not neglect it. The Prefect of Police, who retained all his doubts with regard to Florence and attached extreme importance to the girl's capture, ordered Weber and his men to follow up this trail without delay. Don Luis accompanied the deputy chief.

EVENTS at once showed that the Prefect of Police was right. Florence had taken refuge in the lodging-house on the Ile Saint-Louis, where she had engaged a room under an assumed name. But she had no sooner arrived than a small boy called at the house, asked for her and went away with her.

They went up to her room and found a parcel done up in a newspaper, containing a nun's habit. The thing was obvious.

Later, in the course of the evening, Weber succeeded in discovering the small boy. He was the son of the porter of one of the houses in the neighborhood. Where could he have taken Florence? When questioned, he definitely refused to betray the lady who had trusted him and who had cried when she kissed him. His mother entreated him. His father boxed his ears. He was inflexible.

In any case, it was not unreasonable to conclude that Florence had not left the Ile Saint-Louis or its immediate vicinity. The detectives persisted in their search all the evening. Weber established his headquarters in a tap-room where every scrap of

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information was brought to him and where his men returned from time to time to receive his orders. He also remained in constant communication with the Prefect's office.

At half past ten a squad of detectives, sent by the Prefect, placed themselves at the deputy chief's disposal. Mazeroux, newly arrived from Rouen and furious with Florence, joined them.

The search continued. Don Luis had gradually assumed its management; and it was he who, so to speak, inspired Weber to ring at this or that door and to question this or that person.

At eleven o'clock the hunt still remained fruitless; and Don Luis was the victim of an increasing and irritating restlessness. But, shortly after midnight, a shrill whistle drew all the men to the eastern extremity of the island, at the end of the Quai d'Anjou.

Two detectives stood waiting for them, surrounded by a small crowd of onlookers. They had just learned that, some distance farther away, on the Quai Henri IV., which does not form part of the island, a motor-car had pulled up outside a house, that there was the noise of a dispute and that the cab had subsequently driven off in the direction of Vincennes.

They hastened to the Quai Henri IV. and at once found the house. There was a door on the ground-floor opening straight on the pavement. The taxi had stopped for a few minutes in front of this door. Two persons, a woman and a man leading her along, had left the ground-floor flat. When the door of the taxi was shut, a man's voice had shouted from the inside:

"Drive down the Boulevard Saint-Germain and along the quays. Then take the Versailles Road."

But the porter's wife was able to furnish more precise particulars. Puzzled by the tenant of the ground-floor, whom she had seen only once, in the evening, who paid his rent by checks signed in the name of Charles and who but very seldom came to his apartment, she had taken advantage of the fact that her lodge was next to the flat to listen to the sound of voices. The man and the woman were arguing. At one moment the man cried in a louder tone:

"Come with me, Florence. I insist upon it; and I will give you every proof of my innocence tomorrow morning. And, if you nevertheless refuse to become my wife, I shall leave the country. All my preparations are made."

A little later he began to laugh and, again raising his voice, said:

"Afraid of what, Florence? That I shall kill you perhaps? No, no; have no fear——"

The portress had heard nothing more. But was this not enough to justify every alarm?

Don Luis caught hold of the deputy chief.

"Come along! I knew it: the man is capable of anything. It's the Tiger! He means to kill her!"

HE RUSHED outside, dragging the deputy toward the two police motors waiting five hundred yards down. Meanwhile Mazeroux was trying to protest:

"It would be better to search the house, to pick up some clues——"

"Oh," shouted Don Luis, increasing his pace, "the house and the clues will keep! . . . But he's gaining ground, the ruffian . . . and he has Florence with him . . . and he's going to kill her! . . . It's a trap! . . . I'm sure of it——"

He was shouting in the dark, dragging the two men along with irresistible force.

They neared the motors.

"Get ready!" he ordered as soon as he was in sight. "I'll drive myself."

He tried to get into the driver's seat. But Weber objected and pushed him inside, saying:

"Don't trouble . . . The chauffeur knows his business. . . . He'll drive faster than you would."

Don Luis, the deputy chief and two detectives crowded into the cab; Mazeroux took his seat beside the chauffeur.

"Versailles Road!" roared Don Luis.

The car started; and he continued:

"We've got him! You see, it's a magnificent opportunity. He must be going pretty fast, but without forcing the pace, because he doesn't think we're after him. Oh, the villain, we'll make him sit up! . . Quicker, driver! But what the devil are we loaded up like this for? You and I, deputy chief, would have been enough . . . Hi, Mazeroux, get down and jump into the other car! . . . That'll be better, won't it, deputy? It's absurd——"

He interrupted himself; and, as he was

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sitting on the back seat, between the deputy chief and a detective, he arose toward the window and muttered:

"Why, look here, what's the idiot doing? That's not the road! I say, what does this mean?"

A roar of laughter was the only answer. It came from Weber, who was shaking with delight. Don Luis stifled an oath and, making a tremendous effort, tried to leap from the car. Six hands fell upon him and held him motionless. The deputy chief had him by the throat. The detectives clutched his arms. There was no room for him to struggle within the restricted space of the small car; and he felt the cold iron of a revolver on his temple.

"None of your nonsense," growled Weber, "or I'll blow out your brains, my boy! Aha, you didn't expect this! You've made a monkey of me for the last time! It's Weber's revenge; eh?"

And, when Perenna continued to wriggle, he went on in a threatening tone:

"You'll have only yourself to blame, mind! . . . I'm going to count three: one, two——"

"But what's it all about?" bellowed Don Luis.

"Prefect's orders, received just now."

"What orders?"

"To take you to the lockup if the Florence girl escaped us again."

"Have you a warrant?"

"I have."

"And what next?"

"What next? Nothing; the Sante . . . the examining magistrate——"

"But, hang it all, the Tiger's making tracks meanwhile! . . . Oh, rot! Is it possible to be so dense? What fools those fellows are! Oh, confound it!"

He was foaming with rage and, when he saw that they were driving into the prison yard, he gathered all his strength, knocked the revolver out of the deputy's hand and stunned one of the detectives with a blow of his fist.

But ten men came crowding around the doors. Resistance was useless. He understood this; and his rage increased.

"The idiots!" he shouted, while they surrounded him and searched him at the door of the office. "The imbeciles! The bunglers! To go mucking up a job like that! They can lay hands on the villain if they want to and they lock up the honest man . . . while the villain makes himself scarce! . . . And he'll do more murder yet! . . . Florence . . . Florence . . . "

Under the lamp-light, in the midst of the detectives holding him, he was magnificent in his helpless violence.

They dragged him away. With an unparalleled display of strength he drew himself up, shook off the men who were hanging on to him like a pack of hounds worrying some animal at bay, got rid of Weber and accosted Mazeroux in familiar tones. He was gloriously masterful, almost calm, so wholly did he appear to control his seething rage. He gave his orders in breathless little sentences, curt as words of command.

"Maxeroux, run around to the Prefect's. Ask him to ring up Valenglay—yes, the Prime Minister. I want to see him. Have him informed. Ask the Prefect to say it's I—the man who made the German Emperor play his game. My name? He knows. Or, if he forgets, the Prefect can tell him my name."

He paused for a second or two; and then, calmer still, he declared:

"Arsène Lupin! Telephone those two words to him and just say this: 'Arsène Lupin wishes to speak to the Prime Minister on very important business.' Get that through to him at once. The Prime Minister would be very angry if he heard afterward that they had neglected to communicate my request. Go, Mazeroux, and then find the villain's tracks again."

The Governor of the prison had opened the jail-book.

"You can enter my name, monsieur le Directeur," said Don Luis. "Put down 'Arsène Lupin.' "

The Governor smiled and said:

"I should find a difficulty in putting down any other. It's on the warrant: 'Arsène Lupin, alias Don Luis Perenna.' "

Don Luis felt a little shudder pass through him at the sound of those words. The fact that he was arrested under the name of Arsène Lupin made his position doubly dangerous.

"Ah," he said, "so they've resolved——"

"I should think so!" said Weber in a tone of triumph. "We've resolved to take the bull by the horns and to go straight for Lupin. Plucky of us, eh? Never fear, we'll show you something better than that!"

Don Luis did not flinch. Turning to Mazeroux again, he said:

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"Don't forget my instructions, Mazeroux."

But there was a fresh blow in store for him. The sergeant did not answer his remark. Don Luis watched him closely and once more gave a start. He had just perceived that Mazeroux also was surrounded by men who were holding him tight. And the poor sergeant stood silently shedding tears.

Weber's liveliness increased.

"You'll have to excuse him, Lupin. Sergeant Mazeroux accompanies you to prison, though not in the same cell."

"Ah!" said Don Luis, drawing himself up. "Is Mazeroux put into jail?"

"Prefect's orders, warrant duly executed."

"And on what charge?"

"Accomplice of Arsène Lupin."

"Mazeroux my accomplice? Get out! Mazeroux? The most honest man that ever lived!"

"The most honest man that ever lived, as you say. That didn't prevent people from going to him when they wanted to write to you or prevent him from bringing you the letters. Which proves that he knew where you were hanging out. And there's a good deal more which we'll explain to you, Lupin, in good time. You'll have plenty of fun, I assure you."

Don Luis murmured—

"My poor Mazeroux!"

Then, raising his voice, he said:

"Don't cry, old chap. It's just a matter of the remainder of the night. Yes, I'll share my cards with you; and we'll turn the king and mark game in a very few hours. Don't cry. I've got a much finer berth waiting for you, a more honorable and above all a more lucrative position. I have just what you want.

"You don't imagine, surely, that I wasn't prepared for this! Why, you know me! Take it from me: I shall be at liberty tomorrow and the Government, after setting you free, will pitch you into a colonelcy or something, with a marshal's pay attached to it. So don't cry, Mazeroux."

Then, addressing Weber, he said to him in the voice of a principal giving an order and knowing that the order will be executed without discussion:

"Monsieur, I will ask you to fulfil the confidential mission which I was entrusting to Mazeroux. First, inform the Prefect of Police that I have a communication of the very highest importance to make to the Prime Minister. Next, discover the Tiger's tracks at Versailles before the night is over. I know your merit, monsieur, and I rely entirely upon your diligence and your zeal. Meet me at twelve o'clock tomorrow."

And, still maintaining his attitude of a principal who has given his instructions, he allowed himself to be taken to his cell.

It was ten to one. For the last fifty minutes, the enemy had been bowling along the highroad, carrying off Florence like a prey which it now seemed impossible to snatch from him.

The door was locked and bolted.

Don Luis reflected:

"Even presuming that Monsieur le Préfet consents to ring up Valenglay, he won't do so before the morning. So they've given the villain eight hours start before I'm free. Eight hours! Curse it!"

He thought a little longer, then shrugged his shoulders with the air of one who, for the moment, has nothing better to do than wait, and flung himself on his mattress, murmuring—

"Hushaby, Lupin!"

CHAPTER XIX

OPEN SESAME!

IN SPITE of his usual facility for sleep, Don Luis slept for three hours at most. He was racked with too much anxiety; and, though his plan of conduct was worked out mathematically, he could not help foreseeing all the obstacles which were likely to frustrate that plan. Of course Weber would speak to M. Desmalions. But would M. Desmalions telephone to Valenglay?

"He is sure to telephone," Don Luis declared, stamping his foot. "It doesn't let him in for anything. And at the same time he would be running a big risk if he refused, especially as Valenglay must have been consulted about my arrest and is obviously kept informed of all that happens."

He next asked himself what exactly Valenglay could do, once he was told. For, after all, was it not too much to expect that the head of the Government, that the Prime Minister, should put himself out to obey the injunctions and assist the schemes of M. Arsène Lupin?

"He will come!" he cried, with the same

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persistent confidence. "Valenglay doesn't care a hang for form and ceremony and all that nonsense. He will come, even if it is only out of curiosity, to learn what the Kaiser's friend can have to say to him. Besides, he knows me! I am not one of those beggars who inconvenience people for nothing. There's always something to be gained by meeting me. He'll come!"

But another question at once presented itself to his mind. Valenglay's coming in no way implied his consent to the bargain which Perenna meant to propose to him. And even if Don Luis succeeded in convincing him, what risks remained! How many doubtful points to overcome! And then the possibilities of failure!

Would Weber pursue the fugitive's motor-car with the necessary decision and boldness? Would he get on the track again? And, having got on the track, would he be certain not to lose it?

And then . . . and then, even supposing that all the chances were favorable, was it not too late? Taking for granted that they hunted down the wild beast, that they drove him to bay, would he not meanwhile have killed his prey? Knowing himself beaten, would a monster of that kind hesitate to add one more murder to the long list of his crimes?

And this, to Don Luis, was the crowning terror. After all the difficulties which, in his stubbornly confident imagination, he had managed to surmount, he was brought face to face with the horrible vision of Florence being sacrificed, of Florence dead!

"Oh, the torture of it!" he stammered. "I alone could have succeeded; and they shut me up!"

He hardly put himself out to inquire into the reasons for which M. Desmalions, suddenly changing his mind, had consented to his arrest, thus bringing back to life that troublesome Arsène Lupin with whom the police had not hitherto cared to hamper themselves. No, that did not interest him. Florence alone mattered. And the minutes passed; and each minute wasted brought Florence nearer to her doom.

He remembered a similar occasion when, some years before, he waited in the same way for the door of his cell to open and the German Emperor to appear. But how much greater was the solemnity of the present moment! Before, it was at the very most his liberty that was at stake. This time it was Florence's life which Fate was about to offer or refuse him.

"Florence! Florence!" he kept repeating in his despair.

He no longer had a doubt of her innocence. Nor did he doubt that the other loved her and had carried her off, not so much for the hostage of a coveted fortune as for a love-spoil, which a man destroys if he can not keep it.

"Florence! Florence!"

He was suffering from an extraordinary fit of depression. His defeat seemed irretrievable. There was no question of hastening after Florence, of catching the murderer. Don Luis was in prison, under his own name of Arsène Lupin; and the whole problem lay in knowing how long he would remain there, for months or for years!

It was then that he fully realized what his love for Florence meant. He perceived that it took the place in his life of his former passions, his craving for luxury, his desire for mastery, his pleasure in fighting, his ambition, his revenge. For two months he had been struggling to win her and for nothing else. The search after the truth and the punishment of the criminal were to him no more than means of saving Florence from the dangers that threatened her.

If Florence had to die, if it was too late to snatch her from the enemy, in that case he might as well remain in prison. Arsène Lupin spending the rest of his days in a convict settlement was a fitting end to the spoiled life of a man who had not even been able to win the love of the only woman he had really loved.

It was a passing mood and, being totally opposed to Don Luis' nature, finished abruptly in a state of utter confidence which no longer admitted the least particle of anxiety or doubt. The sun had risen. The cell gradually became filled with daylight. And Don Luis remembered that Valenglay reached his office on the Place Beauveau at seven o'clock in the morning.

From this moment he felt absolutely calm. Coming events presented an entirely different aspect to him, as if they had, so to speak, turned right around. The contest seemed to him easy, the facts free from complications. He understood as clearly as if the actions had been performed that his will could not but be obeyed. The deputy chief must inevitably have made a faithful report to the Prefect of Police. The

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Prefect of Police must inevitably that morning have transmitted Arsène Lupin's request to Valenglay.

Valenglay would inevitably give himself the pleasure of an interview with Arsène Lupin. Arsène Lupin would inevitably, in the course of that interview, obtain Valenglay's consent. These were not suppositions, but certainties; not problems awaiting solution, but problems already solved. Starting from A and continuing along B and C, you arrive, whether you wish it or not, at D.

Don Luis began to laugh.

"Come, come, Arsène, old boy! Remember that you brought Mr. Hohenzollern all the way from his Brandenburg marches. Valenglay does not live as far as that, by Jove! And if necessary you can put yourself out a little. . . . That's it; I'll consent to take the first step. I will go and call on M. de Beauveau. M. Valenglay, it is a pleasure to see you."

He went gaily to the door, pretending that it was open and that he had only to walk through to be received when his turn came.

He repeated this child's play three times, bowing low and long, as if holding a plumed hat in his hand, and murmuring—

"Open sesame!"

At the fourth time the door opened, and a warder appeared.

Don Luis said in a ceremonious tone—

"I hope I have not kept the Prime Minister waiting?"

There were four inspectors in the corridor.

"Are these gentlemen my escort?" he asked. "That's right. Announce Arsène Lupin, Grandee of Spain, his Most Catholic Majesty's cousin. My lords, I follow you. Turnkey, here are twenty crowns for your pains, my friend."

He stopped in the corridor.

"By Jupiter, no gloves; and I haven't shaved since yesterday!"

The inspectors had surrounded him and were pushing him a little roughly. He seized two of them by the arm. They groaned.

"That'll teach you," he said. "You've no orders to thrash me, have you? Nor even to handcuff me? That being so, young fellows, behave!"

The prison Governor was standing in the hall.

"I've had a capital night, my dear Governor," said Don Luis. "Your C. T. C. rooms are the very acme of comfort. I'll see that the Lockup Arms receives a star in the Baedeker. Would you like me to write you a testimonial in your jail-book? You wouldn't? Perhaps you hope to see me again? Sorry, my dear Governor, but it's impossible. I have other things to do."

A motor-car was waiting in the yard. Don Luis stepped in, with the four detectives.

"Place Beauveau," he said to the driver.

"No; Rue Vineuse," said one of the detectives, correcting him.

"Oho!" said Don Luis. "His Excellency's private residence! His Excellency prefers that my visit should be kept secret. That's a good sign. By the way, dear friends, what's the time?"

His question remained unanswered. And as the detectives had drawn the blinds, he was unable to consult the clocks in the street.

It was not until he was at Valenglay's, in the Prime Minister's little ground-floor flat near the Trocadéro, that he saw a clock on the mantelpiece.

"A quarter to seven!" he exclaimed. "Good! There's not been much time lost."

Valenglay's study opened on a flight of steps that ran down to a garden filled with aviaries. The room itself was crammed with books and pictures.

A bell rang; and the detectives went out, following the old maid servant who had shown them in. Don Luis was left alone.

He was still calm, but nevertheless felt a certain uneasiness, a longing to be up and doing, to throw himself into the fray; and his eyes kept on involuntarily returning to the face of the clock. The minute-hand seemed endowed with extraordinary speed.

AT LAST some one entered, ushering in a second person. Don Luis recognized Valenglay and the Prefect of Police.

"That's it," he thought. "I've got him!"

He saw this by the sort of vague sympathy perceptible on the old Premier's lean and bony face. There was not a sign of arrogance, nothing to raise a barrier between the Minister and the suspicious individual whom he was receiving: just a manifest, playful curiosity and sympathy. It was a sympathy which Valenglay had never concealed and of which he even boasted when, after Arsène Lupin's sham death, he spoke

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of the adventurer and the strange relations between them.

"You have not changed," he said, after looking at Don Luis for some time. "Complexion a little darker, a trifle grayer over the temples; that's all."

And putting on a blunt tone, he asked—

"And what is it you want?"

"An answer first of all, Monsieur le Président du Conseil. Has Deputy Chief Weber, who took me to the lockup last night, traced the motor-cab in which Florence Levasseur was carried off?"

"Yes; the motor stopped at Versailles. The persons inside it hired another cab, which is to take them to Nantes. What else do you ask for, besides that answer?"

"My liberty, Monsieur le Président."

"At once, of course?" said Valenglay, beginning to laugh.

"In thirty or thirty-five minutes at most."

"At half past seven, eh?"

"Half past seven at latest, Monsieur le Président."

"And why your liberty?"

"To catch the murderer of Cosmo Mornington, of Inspector Vérot and of the Rousel family."

"Are you the only one that can catch him?"

"Yes."

"Still, the police are moving. The wires are at work. The murderer will not leave France. He sha'n't escape us."

"You can't find him."

"Yes, we can."

"In that case he will kill Florence Levasseur. She will be the scoundrel's seventh victim. And it will be your doing."

Valenglay paused for a moment and then resumed—

"According to you, contrary to all appearances and contrary to the well grounded suspicions of Monsieur le Préfet de Police, Florence Levasseur is innocent?"

"Oh, absolutely, Monsieur le Président!"

"And you believe her to be in danger of death?"

"She is in danger of death."

"Are you in love with her?"

"I am."

Valenglay experienced a little thrill of enjoyment. Lupin in love! Lupin acting through love and confessing his love!

He said:

"I have followed the Mornington case from day to day and I know every detail of it. You have done wonders, monsieur. It is evident that, but for you, the case would never have emerged from the mystery that surrounded it at the start. But I can not help noticing that there are certain flaws in it.

"These flaws, which astonished me on your part, are more easy to understand when we know that love was the primary motive and the object of your actions. On the other hand and in spite of what you say, Florence Levasseur's conduct, her claims as the heiress, her unexpected escape from the hospital, leave little doubt in our minds as to the part which she is playing."

Don Luis pointed to the clock.

"Monsieur le Ministre, it is getting late."

Valenglay burst out laughing.

"I never met any one like you! Don Luis Perenna, I am sorry that I am not some absolute monarch. I should make you the head of my secret police."

"A post which the German Emperor has already offered me."

"Oh, nonsense!"

"And I refused it."

Valenglay laughed heartily; but the clock struck seven. Don Luis began to grow anxious. Valenglay sat down and, coming straight to the point, said in a serious voice:

"Don Luis Perenna, on the first day of your reappearance; that is to say, at the very moment of the murders on the Boulevard Suchet, Monsieur le Préfet de Police and I made up our minds as to your identity. Perenna was Lupin.

"I have no doubt that you understood the reason why we did not wish to bring back to life the dead man that you were and why we granted you a sort of protection. Monsieur le Prefét de Police was entirely of my opinion. The work which you were pursuing was a salutary work of justice; and your assistance was so valuable to us that we strove to spare you any sort of annoyance. As Don Luis Perenna was fighting the good fight, we left Arsène Lupin in the background. Unfortunately——"

Valenglay paused again and declared—

"Unfortunately Monsieur le Préfet de Police last night received a denunciation, supported by detailed proofs, accusing you of being Arsène Lupin."

"Impossible!" cried Don Luis. "That is a statement which no one is able to prove by material evidence. Arsène Lupin is dead."

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"If you like," Valenglay agreed. "But that does not show that Don Luis Perenna is alive."

"Don Luis Perenna has a duly legalized existence, Monsieur le Président."

"Perhaps. But it is disputed."

"By whom? There is only one man who would have the right; and to accuse me would be his own undoing. I can not believe him to be stupid enough——"

"Stupid enough, no; but crafty enough, yes."

"You mean Caceres, the Peruvian attaché?"

"Yes."

"But he is abroad!"

"More than that; he is a fugitive from justice, after embezzling the funds of his Legation. But before leaving the country he signed a statement that reached us yesterday evening, declaring that he faked up a complete record for you under the name of Don Luis Perenna. Here is your correspondence with him and here are all the papers establishing the truth of his allegations. Any one will be convinced, on examining them, first, that you are not Don Luis Perenna and secondly, that you are Arsène Lupin."

Don Luis made an angry gesture.

"That blackguard of a Caceres is a mere tool," he snarled. "The other man's behind him, has paid him and is controlling his actions. It's the scoundrel himself; I recognize his touch. He has once more tried to get rid of me at the decisive moment."

"I am quite willing to believe it," said the Prime Minister. "But as all these documents, according to the letter that came with them, are only photographs and as, if you are not arrested this morning, the originals are to be handed to a leading Paris newspaper tonight, we are obliged to take note of the accusation."

"But, Monsieur le Président," exclaimed Don Luis, "as Caceres is abroad and as the scoundrel who bought the papers of him was also obliged to take to flight before he was able to execute his threats, there is no fear now that the documents will be handed to the press."

"How do we know? The enemy must have taken his precautions. He may have accomplices."

"He has none."

"How do we know?"

Don Luis looked at Valenglay and said—

"What is it that you really wish to say, Monsieur le Président?"

"I will tell you. Although pressure was brought to bear upon us by Caceres' threats, Monsieur le Préfet de Police, anxious to see all possible light shed on the plot in which Florence Levasseur played a part, did not interfere with your last night's expedition. As that expedition led to nothing, he determined at any rate to profit by the fact that Don Luis had placed himself at our disposal and to arrest Arsène Lupin.

"If we now let him go the documents will certainly be published; and you can see the absurd and ridiculous position in which that will place us in the eyes of the public. Well, at this very moment you ask for the release of Arsène Lupin, a release which would be illegal, uncalled-for and inexcusable. I am obliged therefore to refuse it and I do refuse it."

He ceased; and then, after a few seconds, he added—

"Unless——"

"Unless?" asked Don Luis.

"Unless—and this is what I wanted to say—unless you offer me in exchange something so extraordinary and so tremendous that I could consent to risk the annoyance which the absurd release of Arsène Lupin would bring down upon my head."

"But, Monsieur le Président, surely, if I bring you the real criminal, the murderer of——"

"I don't need your assistance for that."

"And if I give you my word of honor, Monsieur le Président, to return the moment my task is done and give myself up?"

Valenglay struck the table with his fist and, raising his voice and addressing Don Luis with a certain genial familiarity, cried:

"Come, Arsène Lupin," he said, "play the game! If you really want to have your way, pay for it! Hang it all, remember that after all this business and especially after the incidents of last night, you and Florence Levasseur will be to the public what you already are—the responsible actors in the tragedy; nay more, the real and only criminals. And it is now, when Florence Levasseur has taken to her heels, that you come and ask me for your liberty! Very well; but —— it, set a price to it and don't haggle with me!"

"I am not haggling, Monsieur le Président," declared Don Luis in a very straight-

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forward manner and tone. "What I have to offer you is certainly much more extraordinary and tremendous than you imagine. But if it were twice as extraordinary and twice as tremendous, it would not count, once Florence Levasseur's life is in danger. Nevertheless, I was entitled to try for a less expensive transaction. Of this your words remove all hope. I will therefore lay my cards upon the table, as you demand and as I had made up my mind to do."

He sat down opposite Valenglay, in the attitude of a man treating with another on equal terms.

"I shall not be long. A single sentence, Monsieur le Président, will express the bargain which I am proposing to the Prime Minister of my country."

And, looking Valenglay straight in the eyes, he said, slowly, syllable by syllable—

"In exchange for twenty-four hours' liberty and no more, undertaking on my honor to return here tomorrow morning and to return here either with Florence, to give you every proof of her innocence, or without her, to constitute myself a prisoner, I offer you——"

He took his time and in a serious voice concluded—

"I offer you a kingdom, Monsieur le Président du Conseil!"

THE sentence sounded bombastic and ludicrous, sounded silly enough to provoke a shrug of the shoulders, sounded like one of those sentences which only an imbecile or a lunatic could utter. And yet Valenglay remained impassive. He knew that, in such circumstances as the present, the man before him was not the man to indulge in jesting.

And he knew it so fully that, instinctively, accustomed as he was to momentous political questions in which secrecy is of the utmost importance, he cast a glance toward the Prefect of Police, as if M. Desmalions' presence in the room hindered him.

"I positively insist," said Don Luis, "that Monsieur le Préfet de Police shall stay and hear what I have to say. He is better able than any one else to appreciate the value of it; and he will bear witness to its correctness in certain particulars."

"Speak," said Valenglay.

His curiosity knew no bounds. He did not much care whether Don Luis' proposal could have any practical results. In his heart, he did not believe in it. But what he wanted to know was the lengths to which that demon of audacity was prepared to go and on what new prodigious adventure he based the pretensions which he was putting forward so calmly and frankly.

Don Luis smiled.

"Will you allow me?" he asked.

Arising and going to the mantelpiece, he took down from the wall a small map representing Northwest Africa. He spread it on the table, placed different objects on the four corners to hold it in position and resumed:

"There is one matter, Monsieur le Président, which puzzled Monsieur le Préfet de Police and about which I know that he caused inquiries to be made; and that matter is how I employed my time, or rather how Arsène Lupin employed his time, during the last three years of his service with the Foreign Legion."

"Those inquiries were made by my orders," said Valenglay.

"And they led——?"

"To nothing."

"So that you do not know what I did during my captivity?"

"Just so."

"I will tell you, Monsieur le Président. It will not take me long."

DON LUIS pointed with a pencil to a spot in Morocco marked on the map.

"It was here that I was taken prisoner on the twenty-fourth of July. My capture seemed queer to Monsieur le Préfet de Police and to all who subsequently heard the details of the incident. They were astonished that I should have been foolish enough to get caught in ambush and to allow myself to be trapped by a troop of forty Berber horse. Their surprise is justified. My capture was a deliberate move on my part . . .

"You will perhaps remember, Monsieur le Président, that I enlisted in the Foreign Legion after making a fruitless attempt to kill myself in consequence of some really terrible private disasters. I wanted to die, and I thought that a Moorish bullet would give me the final rest for which I longed.

"Fortune did not permit it. My destiny, it seemed, was not yet fulfilled. Then what had to be was. Little by little, unknown to myself, the thought of death vanished and I recovered my love of life. A few rather striking feats of arms had given me back

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all my self-confidence and all my desire for action.

"New dreams seized hold of me. I fell a victim to a new ideal.

"From day to day I needed more space, greater independence, wider horizons, more unforeseen and personal sensations. The Legion, great as my affection was for the plucky fellows who had welcomed me so cordially, was no longer enough to satisfy my craving for activity.

"One day, without thinking much about it—in a blind prompting of my whole being toward a great adventure which I did not clearly see, but which attracted me in a mysterious fashion—one day, finding myself surrounded by a band of the enemy, though still in a position to fight, I allowed myself to be captured.

"That is the whole story, Monsieur le Président. As a prisoner, I was free. A new life opened before me . . . However, the incident nearly turned out badly. My three dozen Berbers, a troop detached from an important nomad tribe that used to pillage and put to ransom the districts lying on the middle chains of the Atlas Range, first galloped back to the little cluster of tents where the wives of their chiefs were encamped under the guard of some ten men. They packed off at once; and, after a week's march which I found pretty arduous, for I was on foot, with my hands tied behind my back, following a mounted party, they stopped on a narrow upland commanded by rocky slopes and covered with skeletons moldering among the stones and with remains of French swords and other weapons.

"Here they planted a stake in the ground and fastened me to it. I gathered from the behavior of my captors and from a few words which I overheard that my death was decided on. They meant to cut off my ears, nose and tongue and then my head. . . .

"However, they began by preparing their repast. They went to a well close by, ate and drank and took no further notice of me except to laugh at me and describe the various treats they held in store for me. . . . Another night passed. The torture was postponed until the morning, a time that suited them better. At break of day they crowded around me, uttering yells and shouts with which were mingled the shrill cries of the women.

"When my shadow covered a line which they had marked on the sand the night before, they ceased their din; and one of them, who was to perform the surgical operations prescribed for me, stepped forward and ordered me to put out my tongue. I did so. He took hold of it with a corner of his *burnoose* and with his other hand drew his dagger from its sheath.

"I shall never forget the ferocity, coupled with ingenuous delight, of his expression, which was like that of a mischievous boy amusing himself by breaking a bird's wings and legs. Nor shall I ever forget the man's stupefaction when he saw that his dagger no longer consisted of anything but the pommel and a harmless and ridiculously small stump of the blade, just long enough to keep it in its sheath. His fury was revealed by a splutter of curses and he at once rushed at one of his friends and snatched his dagger from him.

"The same stupefaction followed—this dagger was also broken off at the hilt. The next thing was a general tumult, in which one and all brandished their knives. But all of them uttered howls of rage.

"There were forty-five men there; and their forty-five knives were smashed. . . . The chief flew at me as if holding me responsible for this incomprehensible phenomenon. He was a tall, lean old man, slightly hunch-backed, blind of one eye, hideous to look upon. He aimed a huge pistol point-blank at my head and he struck me as so ugly that I burst out laughing in his face. He pulled the trigger. The pistol missed fire. He pulled it again. The pistol again missed fire. . . .

"All of them at once began to dance around the stake to which I was fastened. Gesticulating wildly, hustling one another and roaring like thunder, they leveled their various fire-arms at me—muskets, pistols, carbines, old Spanish blunderbusses. The hammers clicked. But the muskets, pistols, carbines and blunderbusses did not go off! . . .

"It was a regular miracle. You should have seen their faces. I never laughed so much in my life; and this completed their bewilderment.

"Some ran to the tents for more powder. Others hurriedly reloaded their arms, only to meet with fresh failure, while I did nothing but laugh and laugh! . . . The thing could not go on indefinitely. There were plenty of other means of doing away with me. They had their hands to strangle me

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with, the butt-ends of their muskets to smash in my head with, pebbles to stone me with. And there were over forty of them! . . .

"The old chief picked up a bulky stone and stepped toward me, his features distorted with hatred. He raised himself to his full height, lifted the huge block, with the assistance of two of his men, above my head and dropped it . . . in front of me, on the stake! It was a staggering sight for the poor old man. I had, in one second, unfastened my bonds and sprung backward; and I was standing at three paces from him, with my hands outstretched before me and holding in those outstretched hands the two revolvers which had been taken from me on the day of my capture! . . .

"What followed was the business of a few seconds. The chief now began to laugh as I had laughed, sarcastically. To his mind, in the disorder of his brain, those two revolvers with which I threatened him could have no more effect than the useless weapons which had spared my life. He took up a large pebble and raised his hand to hurl it at my face. His two assistants did the same. And all the others were prepared to follow his example.

" 'Hands down,' I cried, 'or I fire!' The chief let fly his stone. At the same moment three shots rang out. The chief and his two men fell dead to the ground. 'Who's next?' I asked, looking around the band.

"Forty-two Moors remained. I had eleven bullets left. As none of the men budged, I slipped one of my revolvers under my arm and took from my pocket two small boxes of cartridges, containing fifty more bullets. And from my belt I drew three great knives, all of them nicely tapering and pointed. Half of the troop made signs of submission and drew up in line behind me. The other half capitulated a moment after. The battle was over. It had not lasted four minutes."

CHAPTER XX

ARSÈNE I, EMPEROR OF MAURETANIA

DON LUIS ceased. A smile of amusement played around his lips. The recollection of those four minutes seemed to divert him immensely.

Valenglay and the Prefect of Police, who were neither of them men to be unduly surprised at courage and coolness, had listened to him nevertheless, and were now looking at him, in bewildered silence. Was it possible for a human being to carry heroism to such unlikely lengths?

Meanwhile Don Luis went up to the other side of the chimney and pointed to a larger map, representing the French roads.

"You told me, Monsieur le Président, that the scoundrel's motor-car had left Versailles and was going toward Nantes?"

"Yes; and all our arrangements are made to arrest him either on the way, or else at Nantes or at Saint-Nazaire, where he may intend to take ship."

Don Luis Perenna followed with his forefinger the road across France, stopping here and there, marking successive stages. And nothing could have been more impressive than this dumb show.

The man that he was, preserving his composure amid the overthrow of all that he had most at heart, seemed by his calmness to dominate time and circumstances. It was as if the murderer were running away at one end of an unbreakable thread, of which Don Luis held the other, and as if Don Luis could stop his flight at any time by a mere movement of finger and thumb.

As he studied the map, the master seemed to command not only a sheet of cardboard, but also the highroad on which a motor-car was spinning along, subject to his despotic will.

HE WENT back to the table and continued:

"The battle was over. And there was no question of its being resumed. My forty-two worthies found themselves face to face with a conqueror, against whom revenge is always possible, by fair means or foul, but with one who had subjugated them in a supernatural manner. There was no other explanation of the inexplicable facts which they had witnessed. I was a sorcerer, a kind of Marabout, a direct emissary of the Prophet."

Valenglay laughed and said:

"Their interpretation was not so very unreasonable. For after all you must have performed a sleight-of-hand trick which strikes me also as being little less than miraculous."

"Monsieur le Président, do you know a curious short story of Balzac's called 'A Passion in the Desert'?"

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"Yes."

"Well, the key to the riddle lies in that."

"Does it? I don't quite see. You were not under the claws of a tigress. There was no tigress to tame in this instance."

"No, but there were women."

"Eh? How do you mean?"

"Upon my word, Monsieur le Président," said Don Luis gaily, "I should not like to shock you. But I repeat that the troop which carried me off on that week's march included women; and women are a little like Balzac's tigress, creatures whom it is not impossible to tame, to charm, to break in, until you make friends of them."

"Yes, yes," muttered the Premier, madly puzzled, "but that needs time. . . ."

"I had a week."

"And complete liberty of action?"

"No, no, Monsieur le Président. The eyes are enough to start with. The eyes give rise to sympathy, interest, affection, curiosity, a wish to know you better. After that, the merest opportunity——"

"And did an opportunity offer?"

"Yes, one night. I was fastened up, or at least they thought I was. I knew that the chief's favorite was alone in her tent close by. I went there. I left her an hour afterward."

"And the tigress was tamed?"

"Yes, as thoroughly as Balzac's—tamed and blindly submissive."

"But there were several of them?"

"I know, Monsieur le Président, and that was the difficulty. I was afraid of rivalry. But all went well. The favorite was not jealous—far from it. And then, as I have told you, her submission was absolute. In short, I had five stanch, invisible friends, resolved to do anything I wanted and suspected by nobody.

"My plan was being carried out before we reached the last halting-place. My five secret agents collected all the arms during the night. They dashed the daggers to the ground and broke them. They removed the bullets from the pistols. They dampened the powder. Everything was ready for ringing up the curtain."

Valenglay bowed.

"My compliments! You are a man of resource. And your scheme was not lacking in charm. For I take it that your five ladies were pretty?"

Don Luis put on a bantering expression. He closed his eyes, as if to recall his bliss, and let fall the one word—

"Hags!"

THE epithet gave rise to a burst of merriment. But Don Luis, as if in a hurry to finish his story, at once went on:

"In any case, they saved my life, the hussies, and their aid never failed me. My forty-two watch-dogs, deprived of their arms and shaking with fear in those solitudes where everything is a trap and where death lies in wait for you at any minute, gathered around me as their real protector. When we joined the great tribe to which they belonged, I was their actual chief. And it took me less than three months of dangers faced in common, of ambushes defeated under my advice, of raids and pillages effected by my direction, to become the chief also of the whole tribe.

"I spoke their language, I practised their religion, I wore their dress, I conformed to their customs: alas, had I not five wives? Henceforward my dream, which had gradually taken definite shape in my mind, became possible.

"I sent one of my most faithful adherents to France, with sixty letters to hand to sixty men whose names and addresses he learned by heart. Those sixty men were sixty associates whom Arsène Lupin had disbanded before he threw himself from the Capri cliffs. All had retired from business, with a hundred thousand francs apiece in ready money and a small trade or public post to keep them occupied. I had provided one with a tobacconist's shop, another with a job as a park-keeper, others with sinecures in the Government offices. In short, they were respectable citizens.

"To all of them—whether public servants, farmers, municipal councilors, grocers, sacristans or what not—I wrote the same letter, made the same offer and gave the same instructions in case they should accept. . . . Monsieur le Président, I thought that, of the sixty, ten or fifteen at most would come and join me: sixty came, Monsieur le Président—sixty, and not one less! Sixty men punctually arrived at the appointed place.

"On the day fixed, at the hour named, my old armed cruiser, the *Ascendam*, which they had brought back, anchored in the mouth of the Wadi Draa, on the Atlantic

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coast, between Cape Nun and Cape Juby. Two long-boats plied to and fro and landed my friends and the munitions of war which they had brought with them—camp furniture, quick-firing guns, ammunition, motor-boats, stores and provisions, trading-wares, glass beads and cases of gold as well, for my sixty good men and true had insisted on turning their share of the old profits into cash and on putting into the new venture the six million francs which they had received from their old-time chief.

"Need I say more, Monsieur le Président? Must I tell you what a chief like Arsène Lupin was able to attempt, seconded by sixty fine fellows of that stamp and backed by an army of ten thousand well armed and well trained Moorish fanatics? He attempted it; and his success was unparalleled.

"I do not think that there has ever been an idyl like that through which we lived during those fifteen months, first on the heights of the Atlas Range and then in the infernal plains of the Sahara—an idyl of heroism, of privation, of superhuman torture and superhuman joy; an idyl of hunger and thirst, of total defeat and dazzling victory. . . .

"My sixty trusty followers threw themselves into their work with might and main. Oh, what men! You know them, Monsieur le Président du Conseil! You've had them to deal with, Monsieur le Préfet de Police! The rascals! Tears come to my eyes when I think of some of them.

"There were Charolais and his son, who distinguished themselves in the case of the Princesse de Lamballe's tiara. There were Marco, who owed his fame to the Kesselbach case, and Auguste, who was your chief messenger, Monsieur le Président. There were the Growler and the Masher, who achieved such glory in the hunt for the crystal stopper. There were the brothers Beuzeville, whom I used to call the two Ajax. There were Philippe d'Antrac, who was better born than any Bourbon, and Pierre le Grand and Tristan le Roux and Joseph le Jeune."

"And there was Arsène Lupin," said Valenglay, roused to enthusiasm by this list of Homeric heroes.

"And there was Arsène Lupin," repeated Don Luis.

He nodded his head, smiled and continued in a very quiet voice:

"I will not speak of him, Monsieur le Président. I will not speak of him, for the simple reason that you would not believe my story. What they tell about him when he was with the Foreign Legion is mere child's play beside what was to come later. Lupin was only a private soldier. In South Morocco he was a general. Not till then did Arsène Lupin really show what he could do. And—I say it without pride—not even I foresaw what that was. The Achilles of the legend performed no greater feats. Hannibal and Cæsar achieved no more striking results.

"All I need tell you is that, in fifteen months, Arsène Lupin conquered a kingdom twice the size of France. From the Berbers of Morocco, from the indomitable Tuaregs, from the Arabs of the extreme south of Algeria, from the negroes who overrun Senegal, from the Moors along the Atlantic coast, under the blazing sun, in the flames of hell, he conquered half the Sahara and what we may call ancient Mauretania.

"A kingdom of deserts and swamps? Partly, but a kingdom all the same, with oases, wells, rivers, forests and incalculable riches, a kingdom with ten million men and a hundred thousand warriors. This is the kingdom which I offer to France, Monsieur le Président du Conseil."

VALENGLAY did not conceal his amazement. Greatly excited and even perturbed by what he had learned, leaning over his extraordinary visitor, with his hands clutching at the map of Africa, he whispered—

"Explain yourself; be more precise."

Don Luis answered:

"Monsieur le Président du Conseil, I will not remind you of the events of the last few years. France, resolving to pursue a splendid dream of dominion over North Africa, has had to part with a portion of the Congo. I propose to heal the painful wound by giving her thirty times as much as she has lost. And I turn the magnificent and distant dream into an immediate certainty by joining the small slice of Morocco which you have conquered to Senegal at one blow.

"Today, Greater France in Africa exists. Thanks to me, it is a solid and compact expanse—millions of square miles of territory and a coast-line stretching for several thousand miles from Tunis to the Congo, save for a few insignificant interruptions."

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"It's a Utopia," Valenglay protested.

"It's a reality."

"Nonsense! It will take us twenty years' fighting to achieve."

"It will take you exactly five minutes!" cried Don Luis with irresistible enthusiasm. "What I offer you is not the conquest of an empire, but a conquered empire, duly pacified and administered, in full working order and full of life. My gift is a present, not a future, gift.

"I, too, Monsieur le Président du Conseil, I, Arsène Lupin, had cherished a splendid dream. After toiling and moiling all my life, after knowing all the ups and downs of existence, richer than Crœsus, because all the wealth of the world was mine, and poorer than Job, because I had distributed all my treasures, surfeited with everything, tired of unhappiness and more tired still of happiness, sick of pleasure, of passion, of excitement, I wanted to do something that is incredible in the present day—to reign!

"And a still more incredible phenomenon: when this thing was accomplished—when the dead Arsène Lupin had come to life again as a sultan out of the Arabian Nights, as a reigning, governing, law-giving Arsène Lupin, head of the State and head of the Church—then I determined, in a few years, at one stroke, to tear down the screen of rebel tribes against which you were waging a desultory and tiresome war in the north of Morocco, while I was quietly and silently building up my kingdom at the back of it.

"Then, face to face with France and as powerful as herself, like a neighbor treating on equal terms, I would have cried to her: 'It's I, Arsène Lupin! Behold the former swindler and gentleman burglar! The Sultan of Adrar, the Sultan of Iguidi, the Sultan of El Djouf, the Sultan of the Tuaregs, the Sultan of Aubata, the Sultan of Brakna and Frerzon—all these am I, the Sultan of Sultans, grandson of Mohammed, son of Allah—I, I, I, Arsène Lupin!'

"And, before taking the little grain of poison that sets one free—for a man like Arsène Lupin has no right to grow old—I should have signed the treaty of peace, the deed of gift in which I bestowed a kingdom on France, signed it, below the flourishes of my grand dignitaries, kaids, pashas and marabouts, with my lawful signature, the signature to which I am fully entitled, which I conquered at the point of my sword and by my all-powerful will—'Arsène I., Emperor of Mauretania!' "

DON LUIS uttered all these words in a strong voice, but without emphasis, with the very simple emotion and pride of a man who has done much and who knows the value of what he has done. There were but two ways of replying to him—by a shrug of the shoulders, as one replies to a madman, or by the silence that expresses reflection and approval.

The Prime Minister and the Prefect of Police said nothing, but their looks betrayed their secret thoughts. And deep down within themselves they felt that they were in the presence of an absolutely exceptional specimen of mankind, created to perform immoderate actions and fashioned by his own hand for a superhuman destiny.

Don Luis continued:

"It was a fine curtain, was it not, Monsieur le Président du Conseil? And the end was worthy of the work. I should have been happy to have had it so. Arsène Lupin dying on a throne, scepter in hand, would have been a spectacle not devoid of glamour. Arsène Lupin dying with his title of Arsène I., Emperor of Mauretania and benefactor of France—what an apotheosis! The gods have willed it otherwise. Jealous no doubt, they are lowering me to the level of my cousins of the old world and turning me into that absurd creature, a king in exile. Their will be done! Peace to the late Emperor of Mauretania. He has strutted and fretted his hour upon the stage.

"Arsène I. is dead; long live France! Monsieur le Président du Conseil, I repeat my offer. Florence Levasseur is in danger. I alone can rescue her from the monster who is carrying her away. It will take me twenty-four hours. In return for twenty-four hours' liberty, I will give you the Mauretanian Empire. Do you accept, Monsieur le Président du Conseil?"

"Why certainly, I accept," said Valenglay, laughing. "What do you say, my dear Desmalions? The whole thing may not be very orthodox, but, hang it, the Kingdom of Mauretania is a tempting morsel. We'll risk the experiment."

Dun Luis' face expressed so sincere a joy that one might have thought that he had just achieved the most brilliant victory, instead of sacrificing a crown and flinging into the gutter the most fantastic dream

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that mortal man had ever conceived and realized.

He asked—

"What guarantees do you require, Monsieur le Président?"

"None."

"I can show you treaties, documents to prove——"

"Don't trouble. We'll talk about all that tomorrow. Meanwhile go ahead. You are free."

The essential word, the incredible word, was spoken.

DON LUIS took a few steps toward the door.

"One word more, Monsieur le Président," he said, stopping. "Among my former companions is one for whom I procured a post suited to his inclinations and his deserts. This man I did not send for to Africa, thinking that some day or other he might be of use to me through the position which he occupied. I am speaking of Mazeroux, a sergeant in the detective service."

"Sergeant Mazeroux, whom Caceres denounced, with corroborating evidence, as an accomplice of Arsène Lupin, is in prison."

"Sergeant Mazeroux is a model of professional honor, Monsieur le Président. I owed his assistance only to the fact that I was helping the police. I was accepted as an auxiliary and more or less patronized by Monsieur le Préfet. Mazeroux thwarted me in anything I tried to do that was at all illegal. And he would have been the first to take me by the collar if he had been so instructed. I ask for his release."

"Oho!"

"Monsieur le Président, your consent will be an act of justice and I beg you to grant it. Sergeant Mazeroux shall leave France. He can be charged by the Government with a secret mission in the south of Morocco, with the rank of Colonial Inspector."

"Agreed," said Valenglay, laughing heartily. And he added: "My dear Prefect, once we depart from the strictly lawful path, there's no saying where we come to. But the end justifies the means; and the end which we have in view is to have done with this loathsome Mornington case."

"This evening everything will be settled," said Don Luis.

"I hope so. Our men are on the track."

"They are on the track; but they have to check that track at every town, at every village, by inquiries made of every peasant they meet; they have to find out if the motor has not branched off somewhere; and they are wasting time. I shall go straight for the scoundrel."

"By what miracle?"

"That must be my secret for the present, Monsieur le Président."

"Very well. Is there anything you want?"

"This map of France."

"Take it."

"And a couple of revolvers."

"Monsieur le Préfet will be good enough to ask his inspectors for two revolvers and to give them to you. Is that all? Any money?"

"No, thank you, Monsieur le Président. I always carry a useful fifty thousand francs in my pocketbook, in case of need."

"In that case," said the Prefect of Police, "I shall have to send some one with you to the lockup. I presume your pocketbook was among the things taken from you."

Don Luis smiled.

"Monsieur le Préfet, the things that people can take from me are never of any importance. My pocketbook is at the lockup, as you say. But the money"——

He raised his left leg, took his boot in his hands and gave a slight twist to the heel. There was a little click, and a sort of double drawer shot out of the front of the sole. It contained two sheafs of bank-notes and a number of diminutive articles, such as a gimlet, a watch-spring and some pills.

"The wherewithal to escape," he said, "to live and . . . to die. Good-by, Monsieur le Président."

In the hall M. Desmalions told the inspectors to let their prisoner go free. Don Luis asked—

"Monsieur le Préfet, did Deputy Chief Weber give you any particulars about the brute's car?"

"Yes; he telephoned from Versailles. It's a deep-yellow car belonging to the Compagnie des Comètes. The driver's seat is on the left. He's wearing a gray cloth cap with a black leather peak."

"Thank you, Monsieur le Préfet."

And he left the house.

AN INCONCEIVABLE thing had happened. Don Luis was free. Half an hour's conversation had given him the power of acting and of fighting the decisive battle.

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He went off at a run. At the Trocadéro he jumped into a taxi.

"Go to Issy-les-Moulineaux," he cried. "Full speed. Forty francs."

The cab flew through Passy, crossed the Seine and reached the Issy-les-Moulineaux aviation-ground in ten minutes.

None of the aeroplanes was out, for there was a stiff breeze blowing. Don Luis ran to the sheds. The owners' names were written over the doors.

"Davanne," he muttered. "That's the man I want."

The door of the shed was open. A short, stoutish man with a long, red face was smoking a cigarette and watching some mechanics working at a monoplane. The little man was Davanne himself, the famous airman.

Don Luis took him aside and, knowing from the papers the sort of man that he was, opened the conversation so as to surprise him from the start:

"Monsieur," he said, unfolding his map of France, "I want to catch up with some one who has carried off the woman I love and who is making for Nantes by motor. The abduction took place at midnight. It is now about eight o'clock. Suppose that the motor, which is just a hired taxi with a driver who has no inducement to break his neck, does an average of twenty miles an hour, including stoppages . . . In twelve hours' time—that is to say, at twelve o'clock—our man will have covered two hundred and forty miles and reached a spot between Angers and Nantes, at this point on the map."

"Les Ponts-de-Drive," agreed Davanne, who was quietly listening.

"Very well. Suppose, on the other hand, that an aeroplane were to start from Issy-les-Moulineaux at eight o'clock in the morning and travel at the rate of sixty miles an hour without stopping . . . In four hours' time—that is to say, at twelve o'clock—it would reach Les Ponts-de-Drive at exactly the same moment as the motor. Am I right?"

"Perfectly."

"In that case, if we agree, all is well. Does your machine carry a passenger?"

"Sometimes she does."

"We'll start at once. What are your terms?"

"It depends. Who are you?"

"Arsène Lupin."

"The devil you are!" exclaimed Davanne, a little taken aback.

"I am Arsène Lupin. You must know the best part of what has happened from reading about it in the papers. Well, Florence Levasseur was kidnapped last night. I want to save her. What's your price?"

"Nothing."

"That's too much!"

"Perhaps, but the adventure amuses me. It will be an advertisement."

"Very well. But your silence is necessary until tomorrow. I'll buy it. Here's twenty thousand francs."

TEN minutes later Don Luis was dressed in an airman's suit, cap and goggles; and the aeroplane rose to a height of two thousand five hundred feet to avoid the air-currents, flew above the Seine and darted due west across France.

Versailles, Maintenon, Chartres. . . .

Don Luis had never been up in an aeroplane. France had achieved the conquest of the air while he was fighting with the Legion and on the plains of the Sahara. Nevertheless, sensitive though he was to new impressions—and what more exciting impression could he have than this?—he did not experience the heavenly delight of the man who for the first time soars above the earth. What monopolized his thoughts, strained his nerves and excited his whole being to an exquisite degree was the as yet impossible, but inevitable, sight of the motor which they were pursuing.

Amid the tremendous swarm of things beneath them, amid the unexpected din of the wings and the engine, in the immensity of the sky, in the infinity of the horizon, his eyes sought nothing but that and his ears admitted no other sound than the hum of the invisible car. His were the mighty and brutal sensations of the hunter chasing his game. He was the bird of prey whom the distraught quarry has no chance of escaping.

Nogent-le-Rotrou, La Ferté-Bernard, Le Mans. . . .

The two companions did not exchange a single word. Before him Perenna saw Davanne's broad back and powerful neck and shoulders. But, by bending his head a little, he saw the boundless space beneath him; and nothing interested him but the white ribbon of road that ran from town to town and from village to village, at times

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quite straight, as if a hand had stretched it, and at others lazily winding, broken by a river or a church.

On this ribbon, at some place always closer and closer, were Florence and her abductor!

He never doubted it. The yellow taxi was continuing its patient and plucky little effort. Mile after mile, through plains and villages, fields and forests, it was making Angers, with Les Ponts-de-Drive after and, right at the end of the ribbon, the unattainable goal—Nantes, Saint-Nazaire, the steamer ready to start, and victory for the scoundrel. . . .

He laughed at the idea. As if there could be a question of any victory but his—the victory of the falcon over its prey, the victory of the flying bird over the game that runs afoot! Not for a second did he entertain the thought that the enemy might have slunk away by taking another road.

There are some certainties that are equivalent to facts. And this one was so great that it seemed to him that his adversaries were obliged to comply with it. The car was traveling along the road to Nantes. It would cover an average of twenty miles an hour. And as he himself was traveling at the rate of sixty miles, the encounter would take place at the spot named, Les Ponts-de-Drive, and at the hour named, twelve o'clock.

A cluster of houses, a huge castle, towers, steeples—Angers. . . .

Don Luis asked Davanne the time. It was ten minutes to twelve.

Already Angers was a vanished vision. Once more the open country, broken up with many-colored fields. Through it all, a road.

And, on that road, a yellow motor.

The yellow motor! The brute's motor! The motor with Florence Levasseur!

Don Luis' joy contained no surprise. He knew so well that this was bound to happen!

Davanne turned around and cried—

"That's the one, isn't it?"

"Yes; go straight for them."

The airship dipped through space and caught up with the car almost at once. Then Davanne slowed his engine and kept at six hundred feet above the car and a little way behind.

From here they made out all the details. The driver was seated on the left. He wore a gray cap with a black peak. It was one of the deep-yellow taxis of the Compagnie des Comètes. It was the taxi which they were pursuing. And Florence was inside with her abductor.

"At last," thought Don Luis, "I have them!"

They flew for some time, keeping the same distance.

LEVASSEUR waited for a signal which Don Luis was in no hurry to give. He was reveling in the sensation of his power, with a force made up of mingled pride, hatred and cruelty. He was indeed the eagle hovering overhead with its talons itching to rend live flesh. Escaped from the cage in which he had been imprisoned, released from the bonds that fastened him, he had come all the way at full flight and was ready to swoop upon the helpless prey.

He lifted himself in his seat and gave Davanne his instructions:

"Be careful," he said, "not to brush too close by them. They might put a bullet into us."

Another minute passed.

Suddenly they saw that, half a mile ahead, the road divided into three, thus forming a very wide open space which was still further extended by two triangular patches of grass where the three roads met.

"Now?" asked Davanne, turning to Don Luis.

The surrounding country was deserted.

"Off you go!" cried Don Luis.

The aeroplane seemed to shoot down suddenly, as if driven by an irresistible force which sent it flying like an arrow toward the mark. It passed at three hundred feet above the car and then, all at once checking its career, choosing the spot at which it meant to hit the target, calmly, silently, like a night-bird, steering clear of the trees and sign-posts, it alighted softly on the grass of the crossroads.

Don Luis sprang out and ran toward the motor, which was coming along at a rapid pace. He stood in the middle of the road, leveled his two revolvers and shouted—

"Stop, or I fire!"

The terrified driver put on both brakes. The car pulled up.

Don Luis rushed to one of the doors.

"Thunder!" he roared, discharging one of

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his revolvers for no reason and smashing a window-pane.

There was no one in the car.

CHAPTER XXI

"THE SNARE IS LAID. BEWARE, LUPIN!"

THE power that had impelled Don Luis to battle and victory was so intense that it suffered, so to speak, no check. Disappointment, rage, humiliation, torture were all swallowed up in an immediate desire for action and information, together with a longing to continue the chase. The rest was but an incident of no importance, which would soon be very simply explained.

The petrified taxi-driver was gazing wildly at the peasants coming from the distant farms, attracted by the sound of the aeroplane. Don Luis took him by the throat and put the barrel of his revolver to the man's temple.

"Tell me what you know . . . or you're a dead man."

And when the unhappy wretch began to stammer out entreaties:

"It's no use moaning, no use hoping for assistance. . . . Those people won't get here in time. So there's only one way of saving yourself: speak. Last night a gentleman came to Versailles from Paris in a taxi, left it and took yours; is that it?"

"Yes."

"The gentleman had a lady with him?"

"Yes."

"And he engaged you to take him to Nantes?"

"Yes."

"But he changed his mind on the way and told you to put him down?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Before we got to Le Mans, on a little road to the right, with a sort of coach-house, looking like a shed, a hundred yards down it. They both got out there."

"And you went on?"

"He paid me to."

"How much?"

"Five hundred francs. And there was another fare waiting at Nantes that I was to pick up and bring back to Paris for a thousand francs more."

"Do you believe in that other fare?"

"No. I think he wanted to put people off the scent by sending them after me to Nantes while he branched off. Still, I had my money."

"And, when you left them weren't you curious to see what happened?"

"No."

"Take care! A movement of my finger, and I blow out your brains. Speak!"

"Well, yes, then. I went back on foot, behind a bank covered with trees. The man had opened the coach-house and was starting a small limousine car. The lady did not want to get in. They argued pretty fiercely. He threatened and begged by turns. But I could not hear what they said. She seemed very tired. He gave her a glass of water, which he drew from a tap in the wall. Then she consented. He closed the door on her and took his seat at the wheel."

"A glass of water!" cried Don Luis. "Are you sure he put nothing else into the glass?"

The driver seemed surprised at the question and then answered:

"Yes, I think he did . . . He took something from his pocket."

"Without the lady's knowledge?"

"Yes; she didn't see."

Don Luis mastered his horror. After all, it was impossible that the villain had poisoned Florence in that way, at that place, without anything to warrant so great a hurry. No; it was more likely that he had employed a narcotic, a drug of some sort, which would dull Florence's brain and make her incapable of noticing by what new roads and through what towns he was taking her.

"And then," he repeated, "she decided to step in?"

"Yes; and he shut the door and got into the driver's seat. I went away then."

"Before knowing which direction they took?"

"Yes."

"Did you suspect on the way that they thought that they were being followed?"

"Certainly. He did nothing but put his head out of the window."

"Did the lady cry out at all?"

"No."

"Would you know him again if you saw him?"

"No, I'm sure I shouldn't. At Versailles it was dark. And this morning I was too far away. Besides, it's curious, but the first time he struck me as very tall and this morning, on the contrary, he looked quite a short

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man, as if bent in two. I can't understand it at all."

Don Luis reflected. It seemed to him that he had asked all the necessary questions. Moreover, a gig drawn by a quick-trotting horse was approaching the cross-roads. There were two others behind it. And the groups of peasants were now quite near. He must finish the business.

He said to the chauffeur:

"I can see by your face that you intend to talk about me. Don't do that; it would be foolish of you. Here's a thousand-franc note for you. Only, if you blab I'll make you repent it. That's all I have to say to you."

He turned to Davanne, whose machine was beginning to block the traffic, and asked—

"Can we start?"

"Whenever you like. Where are we going?"

Paying no attention to the movements of the people coming from every side, Don Luis unfolded his map of France and spread it out before him. He experienced a few seconds of anxiety at seeing the complicated tangle of roads and picturing the infinite number of places to which the villain might carry Florence. But he pulled himself together. He did not allow himself to hesitate. He refused even to reflect.

He was determined to find out and to find out everything at once, without clues, without useless consideration, simply by the marvelous intuition which invariably guided him at any crisis in his life.

And his self-respect also required that he should give Davanne an answer without delay and that the disappearance of those whom he was pursuing should not seem to embarrass him. With his eyes glued to the map, he placed one finger on Paris and another on Le Mans and, even before he had asked himself why the scoundrel had chosen that Paris-Le Mans-Angers route, he knew the answer to the question.

The name of a town had struck him and made the truth appear like a flash of lightning—Alençon! Then and there, by the light of his memory, he penetrated the mystery.

He repeated:

"Where are we going? Back again, bearing to the left."

"Any particular place?"

"Alençon."

"All right," said Davanne. "Lend a hand, some of you. I can make an easy start from that field just there."

Don Luis and a few others helped him and the preparations were soon made. Davanne tested his engine. Everything was in perfect order.

AT THAT moment a powerful racing-car, with a siren yelling like a vicious animal, came tearing along the Angers Road and promptly stopped. Three men got out and rushed up to the driver of the yellow taxi-cab. Don Luis recognized them. They were Weber, the deputy chief, and the men who had taken him to the lockup the night before, sent by the Prefect of Police to follow up the scoundrel's tracks.

They had a brief interchange of words with the cab-driver, which seemed to put them out; and they kept on gesticulating and plying him with fresh questions while looking at their watches and consulting their road-maps.

Don Luis went up to Weber. He was unrecognizable, with his head wrapped in his aviation-cap and his face concealed by his goggles. Changing his voice—

"The birds have flown, Mr. Deputy Chief," he said.

Weber looked at him in utter amazement.

Don Luis grinned:

"Yes, flown. Our friend from the Ile Saint Louis is a smooth proposition, you know. The fellow's in his third motor. After the yellow car of which you heard at Versailles last night, he took another at Le Mans—destination unknown."

The deputy chief opened his eyes in amazement. Who was this person who was mentioning facts that had been telephoned to police headquarters only at two o'clock that morning? He gasped—

"But who are you, monsieur?"

"What? Don't you know me? What's the good of making appointments with people? You strain every nerve to be punctual; and then they ask you who you are! Come, Weber, confess that you're doing it to annoy me. Must you gaze on my features in broad daylight? Here goes!"

He raised his mask.

"Arsène Lupin!" spluttered the detective.

"At your service, young fellow: on foot, in the saddle, and in mid air. That's where I'm going now. Good-by."

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And so great was Weber's astonishment at seeing Arsène Lupin, whom he had taken to the lockup twelve hours before, standing in front of him, free, at two hundred and forty miles from Paris, that Don Luis, as he went back to Davanne, thought:

"What a crusher! I've knocked him out in one round. There's no hurry. The referee will count ten at least three times before Weber can say, 'Mother!' "

DAVANNE was ready. Don Luis climbed into the monoplane. The peasants pushed at the wheels. The machine started.

"North-northeast," Don Luis ordered. "Ninety miles an hour. Ten thousand francs."

"We've the wind against us," said Davanne.

"Five thousand francs extra for the wind," shouted Don Luis.

He admitted no obstacle, in his haste to reach Damigni, the village near Alençon. He now understood the whole thing and, harking back to the very beginning, he was surprised that his mind had never perceived the connection between the skeletons of Alfred Dedessuslamare and his wife Victorine hanging in the barn near Damigni and the series of crimes resulting from the Mornington inheritance. Stranger still, how was it that the almost certain murder of Langernault, Hippolyte Fauville's old friend, had not afforded him all the clues which it contained? The crux of the sinister plot lay in that.

Who, except some one in the village or some one who had lived in the village, could have intercepted, on Fauville's behalf, the letters which Fauville was supposed to write to his old friend Langernault—letters accusing his wife and Gaston Sauverand of plotting against his life?

And now everything was clear. It was the nameless scoundrel who had started his career of crime by killing old Langernault and then the Dedessuslamare couple. The method was the same as later on; it was not direct murder, but anonymous murder, murder by suggestion. Like Mornington the American, like Fauville the engineer, like Marie, like Gaston Sauverand, old Langernault had been craftily done away with and the Dedessuslamare couple driven to commit suicide in the barn.

It was from there that the Tiger had come to Paris, where later he was to find Fauville and Cosmo Mornington and plot the tragic affair of the inheritance.

And it was thither that he was now returning!

There was no doubt about that. To begin with, the fact that he had administered a narcotic to Florence constituted an indisputable proof. Was he not obliged to put Florence to sleep in order to prevent her from recognizing the landscape at Alençon and Damigni, or the Old Castle, which she had explored with Gaston Sauverand?

On the other hand, the Le Mans-Angers-Nantes route, which had been taken to put the police on a false track, meant only an extra hour or two, at most, for any one motoring to Alençon. Lastly, that coach-house near a big town, that limousine waiting, ready-charged with gasoline, showed that the villain, when he intended to visit his retreat, took the precaution of stopping at Le Mans, in order to go from there, in his limousine, to Langernault's deserted estate.

He would therefore reach his lair at ten o'clock that morning. And he would arrive there with Florence Levasseur dead asleep!

The question forced itself upon Don Luis, the terrible, persistent question: what did the Tiger mean to do with Florence Levasseur?

"Faster! Faster!" cried Don Luis.

Now that he knew the scoundrel's haunt, the man's scheme became hideously evident to him. Feeling himself hunted down, lost, an object of hatred and terror to Florence, whose eyes were now opened to the true state of things, what plan could he have in mind, except his invariable plan of murder?

"Faster!" cried Don Luis. "We're making no headway. Go faster, can't you?"

Florence murdered! Perhaps the crime was not yet accomplished. No, it could not be. Killing takes time. It is preceded by words, by the offer of a bargain, by threats, by entreaties, by a whole unspeakable scene. But the thing was being prepared. Florence was going to die!

Florence was going to die by the hand of the brute who loved her. For he did love her; Don Luis had an intuition of that monstrous love; and he was bound to believe that such a love could end only in torture and bloodshed.

Sablé . . . Sillé-le-Guillaume. . . .

The earth sped beneath them. The trees and houses glided by like shadows.

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And then Alençon—at last Alençon.

It was hardly more than a quarter to two when they landed in a meadow between the town and Damigni. Don Luis made inquiries. A number of motor-cars had passed along the road to Damigni, including a small limousine driven by a gentleman who had turned down a cross-road. And this cross-road led to the woods at the back of Langernault's estate, the Old Castle.

Don Luis' conviction was so firm that, after taking leave of Davanne, he helped him to start on his homeward flight. He had no further need of the aviator. He needed nobody. The final duel was at hand.

HE RAN along, guided by the tracks of the tires in the dust, and followed the cross-road. To his great surprise this road went nowhere near the wall behind the barn from which he had jumped a few weeks before. After clearing the woods, Don Luis came out into a large untilled space where the road turned back toward the estate and ended at an old two-winged gate, protected with iron sheets and bars.

The limousine had gone in that way.

"And I must get in this way, too," thought Don Luis. "I must get in at all costs and immediately, without wasting time in looking for an opening or a handy tree."

Now the wall was thirteen feet high at this spot. Don Luis got in. How he managed it, by what superhuman effort, he himself could not have said after he had done it.

Somehow or other, by hanging on to invisible projections, by digging a knife which he had borrowed from Davanne into the interstices between the stones, he managed it.

And when he was on the other side he recovered the tracks of the tires running to the left, toward a part of the grounds which he did not know, more undulating than the other and broken up with little hills and ruined buildings covered with thick curtains of ivy.

Deserted though the rest of the park was, this portion seemed much more uncivilized, in spite of the ragged remains of box-and-laurel hedges that stood here and there amidst the nettles and brambles and the luxuriant swarm of tall wild-flowers, valerian, mullen, hemlock, foxglove and angelica.

Suddenly, on turning the corner of an old hedge of clipped yews, Don Luis saw the limousine, which had been left, or rather hidden, there in a hollow. The door was open. The disorder of the inside of the car, the rug hanging over the footboard, a broken window, a cushion on the floor, all bore witness to a struggle. The scoundrel had no doubt taken advantage of the fact that Florence was asleep to tie her up; and on arriving, when he tried to take her out of the car, Florence must have clutched at everything that offered.

Don Luis at once verified the correctness of his theory. As he went along the very narrow, grass-grown path that led up the slope, he saw that the grass was uniformly pressed down.

"Oh, the villain!" he thought. "The villain! He doesn't carry his victim; he drags her!"

If he had listened only to his instinct, he would have rushed to Florence's rescue. But his profound sense of what to do and what to avoid saved him from committing any such imprudence. At the first alarm, at the least sound, the Tiger would have throttled his prey. To escape this hideous catastrophe, Don Luis must take him by surprise and then and there deprive him of his power of action. Don Louis controlled himself, therefore, and slowly and cautiously mounted the incline.

The path ran upward between heaps of stones and fallen buildings, and among clumps of shrubs overtopped by beeches and oaks. The place was evidently the site of the old feudal castle which had given the estate its name; and it was here, near the top, that the scoundrel had selected one of his retreats.

The trail continued over the trampled herbage. And Don Luis even caught sight of something shining on the ground, in a tuft of grass. It was a ring, a tiny and very simple ring, consisting of a gold circlet and two small pearls, which he had often noticed on Florence's finger. And the fact that caught his attention was that a blade of grass passed and repassed and passed a third time through the inside of the ring, like a ribbon that had been rolled around it deliberately.

"It's a clear signal," said Perenna to himself. "The villain probably stopped here to rest; and Florence, bound up, but with her fingers free, was able to leave this evidence of her passage."

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So the girl still hoped. She expected assistance. And Don Luis reflected with emotion that it was perhaps to him that this last desperate appeal was addressed.

Fifty steps farther—and this detail pointed to the rather curious fatigue experienced by the scoundrel—there was a second halt and a second clue—a flower, a field-sage, which the poor little hand had picked and plucked of its petals. Next came the print of the five fingers dug into the ground; and next a cross drawn with a pebble. And in this way he was able to follow, minute by minute, all the successive stages of the horrible journey.

The last stopping-place was near. The climb became steeper and rougher. The fallen stones occasioned more frequent obstacles. On the right, Gothic arches, the remains of a chapel, stood out against the blue sky. On the left was a strip of wall, with a mantel-piece still clinging to it.

Twenty steps farther, Don Luis stopped. He seemed to hear something.

SHE LISTENED. He was not mistaken. The sound was repeated and it was the sound of laughter; but such an awful laugh! A strident laugh, evil as the laughter of a devil, and so shrill! It was more like the laugh of a woman, of a madwoman. . . .

Again silence. Then another noise—the noise of an implement striking the ground; then silence again. . . .

And this was happening at a distance which Don Luis estimated at a hundred yards.

The path ended in three steps, cut in the earth. At the top was a fairly large plateau, also encumbered with rubbish and ruins. In the center, opposite Don Luis, stood a screen of immense laurels, planted in a semicircle. The marks of trodden grass led up to it.

Don Luis was a little surprised, for the screen presented an impenetrable outline. He walked on and found that there had once been a cutting and that the branches had ended by meeting again. They were easy to push aside; and it was through here that the scoundrel must have passed. To all appearances he was there now, at the end of his journey, not far away, occupied in some sinister task.

Indeed, the air was rent by a chuckle so close by that Don Luis gave a start and felt as if the scoundrel were laughing beforehand at his intervention. He remembered the letter he had received with the words written in red ink:

> There's still time, Lupin. Retire from the contest. If not, it means your death, too. When you think that your object is attained, when your hand is raised against me and you utter words of triumph, at that same moment the ground will open beneath your feet. The place of your death is chosen. The snare is laid. Beware, Lupin!

The whole letter passed through his brain, with its formidable threat. And he felt a shiver of fear. But no fear could stay the man that he was. He had already taken hold of the branches with his hands and was clearing a way for himself.

HE STOPPED. A last bulwark of leaves hid him from sight. He pulled some of them aside at the level of his eyes.

And he saw . . .

First of all, he saw Florence, alone at this moment, lying on the ground, bound, at thirty yards in front of him; and he at once perceived, to his intense delight, from certain movements of her head that she was still alive. He had come in time. Florence was not dead. She would not die. That was a certainty against which nothing could prevail. Florence would not die.

Then he examined the things around. To the right and left of where he stood, the screen of laurels curved and embraced a sort of arena in which, among yews that had once been clipped into cones, lay capitals, columns, broken pieces of arches and vaults, obviously placed there to adorn the formal garden that had been laid out on the ruins of the ancient donjon-keep.

In the middle was a small circular space reached by two narrow paths, one of which presented the same traces of trodden grass and was a continuation of that by which Don Luis had come, while the other intersected the first at right angles and joined the two ends of the screen of shrubs.

Opposite was a confused heap of broken stones and natural rocks, cemented with clay, bound together by the roots of gnarled trees, the whole forming at the back of the picture a small, shallow grotto, full of crevices that admitted the light. The floor, which Don Luis could easily distinguish, consisted of three or four flag-stones.

Florence Levasseur lay inside this grotto,

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bound hand and foot, looking like the victim of some mysterious sacrifice about to be performed on the altar of the grotto, in the amphitheater of this old garden closed by the wall of tall laurels and overlooked by a pile of ancestral ruins.

In spite of the distance, Don Luis was able to make out every detail of her pale face. Though convulsed with anguish, it still retained a certain serenity, an expression of waiting and even of expectancy, as if Florence, believing until the last moment in the possibility of a miracle, had not yet relinquished all hope of life.

Nevertheless, though she was not gagged she did not call for help. Perhaps she thought that it was useless and that the road which she had strewn with the marks of her passing was more likely to bring assistance to her side than cries, which the villain would soon have stifled. Strange to say, it seemed to Don Luis as if the girl's eyes were obstinately fixed on the very spot where he was hiding. Possibly she suspected his presence. Possibly she foresaw his help.

SUDDENLY Don Luis clutched one of his revolvers and half raised his arm, ready to take aim. The sacrificer, the butcher, had just appeared, not far from the altar on which the victim lay.

He came from between two rocks, between which a bush marked the intervening space, which apparently afforded but a very low outlet, for he still walked as if bent double, with his head bowed and his long arms swinging so low as to touch the ground.

He went to the grotto and gave his horrible chuckle.

"You're still there, I see," he said. "No sign of the rescuer? Perseus is a little late, I fear. He'd better hurry!"

The tone of the Tiger's voice was so shrill that Don Luis heard every word, and so odd, so unhuman, that it gave him a feeling of physical discomfort. He gripped his revolver tightly, prepared to shoot at the first suspicious movement.

"He'd better hurry!" repeated the scoundrel with a laugh. "If not, all will be over in five minutes. You see that I'm a man of method; eh, Florence, my darling?"

He picked up something from the ground. It was a stick shaped like a crutch. He put it under his left arm and, still bent in two, began to walk like a man who has not the strength to stand erect. Then suddenly, and with no apparent cause to explain his change of attitude, he drew himself up and used his crutch as he would a cane. He then walked around the outside of the grotto, making a careful inspection, the meaning of which escaped Don Luis for the time.

He was of a good height in this position; and Don Luis easily understood why the driver of the yellow taxi, who had seen him under two such different aspects, was unable to say whether he was very tall or very short.

But his legs, slack and unsteady, gave way beneath him, as if any prolonged exertion were beyond his power. He relapsed into his first attitude.

The man was a cripple, smitten with some disease that affected his powers of locomotion. He was excessively thin. Don Luis also saw his pallid face, his cavernous cheeks, his hollow temples, his skin the color of parchment—the face of a sufferer from consumption, a bloodless face.

When he had finished his inspection he came up to Florence and said:

"Though you've been very good, baby, and haven't screamed so far, we'd better take our precautions and remove any possibility of a surprise by giving you a nice little gag to wear, don't you think?"

He stooped over her and wound a large handkerchief around the lower part of her face. Then, bending still farther down, he began to speak to her in a very low voice, talking almost into her ear. But wild bursts of laughter, horrible to hear, interrupted this whispering.

Feeling the imminence of the danger, dreading some movement on the wretch's part—a sudden murderous attack, the prompt prick of a poisoned needle—Don Luis had leveled his revolver and, confident of his skill, awaited events.

What was happening over there? What were the words spoken? What infamous bargain was the villain proposing to Florence? At what shameful price could she obtain her release?

The cripple stepped back angrily, shouting in furious accents:

"But don't you understand that you are done for? Now that I have nothing more to fear, now that you have been silly enough to come with me and place yourself in my power, what hope have you left? To move me, perhaps; is that it? Because I'm burning with passion, you imagine? Oh, you

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never made a greater mistake, my pet! I don't care a fig if you do die. Once dead, you cease to count. . . .

"What else? Perhaps you consider that, being crippled, I shall not have the strength to kill you? But there's no question of my killing you, Florence. Have you ever known me kill people? Never! I'm much too big a coward; I should be frightened; I should shake all over. No, no, Florence, I sha'n't touch you; and yet . . .

"Here, look what's going to happen; see for yourself. I tell you, the thing's managed in my own style. . . . And, whatever you do, don't be afraid. It's only a preliminary warning."

He had moved away and, helping himself with his hands, holding on to the branches of a tree, he climbed up the first layers of rock that formed the grotto, on the right. Here he knelt down. There was a small pick-ax lying beside him. He took it and gave three blows to the nearest heap of stones. They came tumbling down in front of the grotto.

Don Luis sprang from his hiding-place with a roar of terror. He had suddenly realized the position. The grotto, the accumulation of boulders, the piles of granite, everything was so placed that its equilibrium could be shattered at any moment and that Florence ran the risk of being buried under the rubbish. It was not a question, therefore, of slaying the villain, but of saving Florence on the spot.

He was half way across in two or three seconds. But here, in one of those mental flashes which are even quicker than the maddest rush, he became aware that the tracks of trampled grass did not cross the central circus and that the scoundrel had gone around it. Why? That was one of the questions which instinct, ever suspicious, puts, but which reason has not the time to answer. Don Luis went straight ahead. And he had no sooner set foot on the place than the catastrophe occurred.

IT ALL happened with incredible suddenness, as though he had tried to walk on space and found himself hurled into it. The ground gave way beneath him. The clods of grass separated; and he fell.

He fell down a hole which was none other than the mouth of a well four feet wide at most, the curb of which had been cut down level with the ground. Only this was what took place: as he was running very fast, his impetus flung him against the opposite wall in such a way that his forearms lay on the outer ledge and his hands were able to clutch at the roots of plants.

So great was his strength that he might just have been able to draw himself up by his wrists. But responding to the attack, the scoundrel had at once hurried to meet his assailant and was now standing at ten paces from Don Luis, threatening him with his revolver.

"Don't move," he cried, "or I'll smash you!"

Don Luis was thus reduced to helplessness, at the risk of receiving the enemy's fire.

Their eyes met for a few seconds. The cripple's were burning with fever, like the eyes of a sick man.

Crawling along, watching Don Luis' slightest movements, he came and squatted beside the well. The revolver was leveled in his outstretched hand. And his infernal chuckle rang out again.

"Lupin! Lupin! That's done it! Lupin's dive! . . . What a fool you must be! I warned you, you know; warned you in blood-red ink. Remember my words: 'The place of your death is chosen. The snare is laid. Beware, Lupin.' And here you are! So you're not in prison? You warded off that stroke, you rogue, you! Fortunately I foresaw events and took my precautions. What do you say to it? What do you think of my little scheme? I said to myself: 'All the police will come rushing at my heels. But there's only one who's capable of catching me; and that's Lupin. So we'll show him the way, we'll lead him on the leash all along a little path scraped clean by the victim's body.

"'And then a few landmarks, scattered here and there. First, the fair damsel's ring, with a blade of grass twisted around it; farther on, a flower without its petals; farther on, the marks of five fingers in the ground; next, the sign of the cross.' No mistaking them, was there? Once you thought me fool enough to give Florence time to play Hop-o'-My-Thumb's game, it was bound to lead you straight to the mouth of the well, to the clods of turf which I dabbed across it last month, in anticipation of this windfall.

"Remember, 'The snare is laid.' And a

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snare after my own style, Lupin; one of the best! Oh, I love getting rid of people with their kind assistance! We work together like friends and partners. You've caught the notion, haven't you?

"I don't do my own job. The others do it for me, hanging themselves or giving themselves careless injections . . . unless they prefer the mouth of a well, as you seem to do, Lupin. My poor old chap, what a sticky mess you're in! I never saw such a face; never, on my word! Florence, do look at the expression on your swain's mobile features!"

He broke off, seized with a fit of laughter that shook his outstretched arm, imparted the most savage look to his face and set his legs jerking under his body like the legs of a dancing doll. His enemy was growing weaker before his eyes. Don Luis' fingers, which had first gripped the roots of the grass, were now vainly clutching the stones of the wall. And his shoulders were sinking lower and lower into the well.

"We've done it!" spluttered the villain in the midst of his convulsions of merriment. "Lord, how good it is to laugh! Especially when one so seldom does. Yes, I'm a wet blanket, I am; a first-rate man at a funeral! You've never seen me laugh, Florence, have you? But this time it's really too amusing. Lupin in his hole and Florence in her grotto; one dancing a jig above the abyss and the other at her last gasp under her mountain. What a sight! . . .

"Come now, Lupin, don't tire yourself! What's the use of those grimaces? You're not afraid of eternity, are you? A good man like you, the Don Quixote of modern times! Come, let yourself go. There's not even any water in the well to splash about in. No; it's just a nice little slide into infinity. You can't so much as hear the sound of a pebble when you drop it in; and just now I threw a piece of lighted paper down and lost sight of it in the dark. Brrrr! It sent a cold shiver down my back! . . .

"Come, be a man! It'll take only a moment; and you've been through worse than that! . . . Good! You nearly did it then. You're making up your mind to it. . . . I say, Lupin! . . . Lupin! . . . Aren't you going to say good-by? Not a smile, not a word of thanks? *Au revoir*, Lupin, *au revoir*."

He ceased. He watched for the appalling end which he had so cleverly prepared and of which all the incidents were following close on one another in accordance with his inflexible will.

It did not take long. The shoulders had gone down. The chin; and then the mouth, convulsed with the death-grin; and then the eyes, drunk with terror; and then the forehead and the hair—the whole head, in short, had disappeared.

The cripple sat gazing wildly, as if in ecstasy, motionless, with an expression of fierce delight and without a word that could trouble the silence and interrupt his hatred.

At the edge of the abyss nothing remained but the hands, the obstinate, stubborn, desperate, heroic hands, the poor helpless hands which alone still lived and which, gradually retreating toward death, yielded and fell back and let go.

And the hands slipped. For a moment the fingers held on like claws. So natural was the effort which they made that it looked as if they did not even yet despair, unaided, of resuscitating and bringing back to the light of day the corpse already entombed in the darkness. And then they in their turn gave way. And then . . . and then, suddenly, there was nothing more to be seen and nothing more to be heard. . . .

THE cripple started to his feet as if released by a spring, and yelled with delight:

"Oof! That's done it! Lupin in the bottomless pit! . . . One more adventure finished! . . . Oof!"

Turning in Florence's direction, he once more danced his dance of death. He raised himself to his full height and then suddenly crouched down again, throwing about his legs like the grotesque ragged limbs of a scarecrow. And he sang and whistled and belched forth insults and hideous blasphemies.

Then he came back to the yawning mouth of the well and, standing some way off, as if still afraid to come nearer, he spat into it three times over.

Nor was this enough for his hatred. There were some broken pieces of statuary on the ground. He took a carved head, rolled it along the grass and sent it crashing down the well. A little farther away was a stack of old, rusty cannon-balls. These also he rolled to the edge and pushed in. Five, ten,

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fifteen cannon-balls went scooting down, one after the other, banging against the walls with a loud and sinister noise which the echo swelled into the angry roar of distant thunder.

"There, take that, Lupin! I'm sick of you, you dirty cad! That's for the spokes you put in my wheel, over that —— inheritance! . . . Here, take this, too! . . . And this! . . . And this! . . . Here's a chocolate for you in case you're hungry. . . . Do you want another? Here you are, old fellow; catch!"

He staggered, seized with a sort of giddiness, and had to squat on his haunches. He was utterly spent. However, obeying a last convulsion, he still found the strength to kneel down by the well and, leaning over the darkness, he stammered breathlessly:

"Hi! Hey! Corpse! Don't go knocking at the gate of hell at once! . . . The little girl's joining you in twenty minutes. . . . Yes, that's it; at four o'clock. . . . You know I'm a punctual man and keep my appointments to the minute. . . . She'll be with you at four o'clock exactly. . . .

"By the way, I was almost forgetting: the inheritance—you know, Mornington's hundred millions. Well, that's mine. Why, of course! You can't doubt that I took all my precautions! . . . Florence will explain everything presently. . . . It's very well thought out . . . You'll see . . . You'll see!"

He could not get out another word. The last syllables sounded more like hiccoughs. The sweat poured from his hair and his forehead; and he sank to the ground, moaning like a dying man tortured by the last throes of death.

He remained like that for some minutes, with his head in his hands, shivering all over his body. He appeared to be suffering everywhere—in each anguished muscle, in each sick nerve. Then, under the influence of a thought that seemed to make him act unconsciously, one of his hands crept spasmodically down his side and, groping, uttering hoarse cries of pain, he managed to take from his pocket and put to his lips a vial out of which he greedily drank two or three mouthfuls.

He at once revived, as if he had swallowed warmth and strength. His eyes grew calmer; his mouth shaped itself into a horrible smile. He turned to Florence and said:

"Don't flatter yourself, pretty one; I'm not gone yet; and I've plenty of time to attend to you. And then, after that, there'll be no more worries, no more of that schemnice, quiet, uneventful life for me! . . . ing and fighting that wears one out. A With a hundred millions one can afford to take life easy; eh, little girl? . . . Come, come, I'm feeling much better!"

CHAPTER XXII

FLORENCE'S SECRET

IT WAS time for the second act of the tragedy. Don Luis Perenna's death was to be followed by that of Florence. Like some monstrous butcher, the cripple passed from one to the other with no more compassion than if he were dealing with the oxen in a slaughter-house.

Still weak in his limbs, he dragged himself to where the girl lay, took a cigarette from a gunmetal case and, with a final touch of cruelty, said:

"When this cigarette is quite burned out, Florence, it will be your turn. Keep your eyes on it. It represents the last minutes of your life reduced to ashes. Keep your eyes on it, Florence, and think.

"I want you to understand this: All the owners of the estate, and old Langernault in particular, have always considered that the heap of rocks and stones overhanging your head was bound to fall to pieces sooner or later. And I myself, for years, with untiring patience, believing in a favorable opportunity, have amused myself by making it crumble away still more, by undermining it with the rain-water; in short, by working at it in such a way that, upon my word, I can't make out how the thing keeps standing at all. Or rather, I do understand.

"The few strokes with the pick-ax which I gave it just now were merely intended for a warning. But I have only to give one more stroke in the right place and knock out a little brick wedged in between two lumps of stone for the whole thing to tumble to the ground like a house of cards.

"A little brick, Florence," he chuckled, "a tiny little brick which chance placed there, between two blocks of stone, and has kept in position until now. Out comes the brick, down come the blocks—and there's your catastrophe!"

He took breath and continued:

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"After that? After that, Florence, this: Either the smash will take place in such a way that your body will not even be in sight, if any one should dream of coming here to look for you, or else it will be partly visible, in which case I shall at once cut and destroy the cords with which you are tied.

"What will the law think then? Simply that Florence Levasseur, a fugitive from justice, hid herself in a grotto which fell upon her and crushed her. That's all. A few prayers for the rash creature's soul, and not another word.

"As for me . . . as for me, when my work is done and my sweetheart dead, I shall pack my traps, carefully remove all the traces of my coming, smooth every inch of the trampled grass, jump into my motor-car, sham death for a little while and then put in a sensational claim for the hundred millions."

He gave a little chuckle, took two or three puffs at his cigarette and added calmly:

"I shall claim the hundred millions and I shall get them. That's the prettiest part of it. I shall claim them because I'm entitled to them; and I explained to you just now, before Master Lupin came interfering, how, from the moment that you were dead, I had the most undeniable legal right to them. And I shall get them, because it is physically impossible to bring up the least sort of proof against me."

He moved closer.

"There's not a charge that can hurt me. Suspicions, yes; moral presumptions, clues, anything you like, but not a scrap of material evidence. Nobody knows me. One person has seen me as a tall man, another as a short man. My very name is unknown. All my murders have been committed anonymously. All my murders are more like suicides, or can be explained as suicides.

"I tell you, the law is powerless. With Lupin dead and Florence Levasseur dead, there's no one to bear witness against me. Even if they arrested me, they would have to discharge me in the end, for lack of evidence. I shall be branded, execrated, hated and cursed; my name will stink in people's nostrils, as if I were the greatest of malefactors. But I shall possess the hundred millions; and with that, pretty one, I shall possess the friendship of all decent men!

"I tell you again, with Lupin and you gone it's all over. There's nothing left, nothing but some papers and a few little things which I have been weak enough to keep until now, in this pocketbook here, and which would be enough and more than enough to cost me my head, if I did not intend to burn them in a few minutes and send the ashes to the bottom of the well.

"So you see, Florence, all my measures are taken. You need not hope for compassion from me, nor for help from anywhere else, since no one knows where I have brought you, and Arsène Lupin is no longer alive. Under these conditions, Florence, make your choice. The ending is in your own hands: Either you die, absolutely and irrevocably, or you accept my love."

There was a moment of silence; then:

"Answer me yes or no. A movement of your head will decide your fate. If it's no, you die. If it's yes, I shall release you. We will go from here and later, when your innocence is proved—and I'll see to that—you shall become my wife. Is the answer yes, Florence?"

He put the question to her with real anxiety and with a restrained passion that set his voice trembling. His knees dragged over the flagstones. He begged and threatened, hungering to be entreated and at the same time almost eager for a refusal, so great was his natural murderous impulse.

"Is it yes, Florence? A nod, the least little nod, and I shall believe you implicitly, for you never lie and your promise is sacred. Is it yes, Florence? Oh, Florence, answer me! It is madness to hesitate. Your life depends on a fresh outburst of my anger. Answer me! . . . Here, look! My cigarette is out. I'm throwing it away, Florence. A sign of your head: is the answer yes or no?"

He bent over her and shook her by the shoulders, as if to force her to make the sign which he asked for. But suddenly seized with a sort of frenzy, he arose to his feet and exclaimed:

"She's crying! She's crying! She dares to weep! But, wretched girl, do you think that I don't know what you're crying for? I know your secret, pretty one, and I know that your tears do not come from any fear of dying. You? Why, you fear nothing! No, it's something else! Shall I tell you your secret? Oh, I can't, I can't . . . though the words scorch my lips. Oh, cursed woman, you've brought it on

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yourself! You yourself want to die, Florence, as you're crying . . . You yourself want to die——"

While he was speaking he hastened to get to work and prepare the horrible tragedy. The leather pocketbook which he had mentioned as containing the papers was lying on the ground; he put it in his pocket. Then, still trembling, he pulled off his jacket and threw it on the nearest bush. Next he took up the pick-ax and climbed the lower stones, stamping with rage and shouting:

"It's you who have asked to die, Florence! Nothing can prevent it now. I can't even see your head, if you make a sign. It's too late! . . . You asked for it and you've got it! . . . Ah, you're crying! You dare to cry! What madness!"

HE WAS standing almost above the grotto, on the right. His anger made him draw himself to his full height. He looked horrible, hideous, atrocious. His eyes filled with blood as he inserted the bar of the pick-ax between the two blocks of granite, at the spot where the brick was wedged in. Then, standing on one side, in a place of safety, he struck the brick—struck it again. At the third stroke the brick flew out.

What happened was so sudden, the pyramid of stones and rubbish came crashing with such violence into the hollow of the grotto and in front of the grotto, that the cripple himself, in spite of his precautions, was dragged down by the avalanche and thrown upon the grass. It was not a serious fall, however; and he picked himself up at once, stammering:

"Florence! Florence!"

Though he had so carefully prepared the catastrophe and brought it about with such determination, its results seemed suddenly to stagger him. He hunted for the girl with terrified eyes. He stooped down and crawled around the chaos, shrouded in clouds of dust. He looked through the interstices. He saw nothing.

Florence was buried under the ruins, dead, invisible, as he had anticipated.

"Dead!" he said, with staring eyes and a look of stupor on his face. "Dead! Florence is dead!"

Once again he lapsed into a state of absolute prostration, which gradually slackened his legs, brought him to the ground and paralyzed him. His two efforts, following so close upon each other and ending in disasters of which he had been the immediate witness, seemed to have robbed him of all his remaining energy.

With no hatred in him, since Arsène Lupin no longer lived; with no love, since Florence was no more, he looked like a man who has lost his last motive for existence.

Twice his lips uttered the name of Florence. Was he regretting his friend? Having reached the last of that appalling series of crimes, was he imagining the several stages, each marked with a corpse? Was something like a conscience making itself felt deep down in that brute? Or was it not rather the sort of physical torpor that numbs the sated beast of prey, glutted with flesh, drunk with blood—a torpor that is almost voluptuousness?

Nevertheless, he once more repeated Florence's name; and tears rolled down his cheeks.

He lay long in this condition, gloomy and motionless; and when, after again taking a few sips of his medicine, he went back to his work, he did so mechanically, with none of that gaiety which had made him hop on his legs and set about his murder as if he were going to a pleasure-party.

He began by returning to the bush from which Lupin had seen him emerge. Behind this bush, between two trees, was a shelter containing tools and arms, spades, rakes, guns and rolls of wire and rope.

Making several journeys, he carried them to the well, intending to throw them down it before he went away. He next examined every particle of the little mound up which he had climbed, in order to make sure that he was not leaving the least trace of his passage.

He made a similar examination of those parts of the lawn on which he had stepped, except the path leading to the well, the inspection of which he kept for the last. He brushed up the trodden grass and carefully smoothed the trampled earth.

He was obviously anxious and seemed to be thinking of other things, while at the same time mechanically doing those things which a murderer knows by force of habit that it is wise to do.

One little incident seemed to wake him up. A wounded swallow fell to the ground close by where he stood. He stooped, caught it and crushed it in his hands, kneading it like a scrap of crumpled paper. And

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his eyes shone with a savage delight as he gazed at the blood that trickled from the poor bird and reddened his hands.

But when he flung the shapeless little body into a furze-bush, he saw on the spikes in the bush a hair, a long, fair hair; and all his depression returned at the memory of Florence.

He knelt in front of the ruined grotto. Then, breaking two sticks of wood, he placed the pieces in the form of a cross under one of the stones.

As he was bending over, a little looking-glass slipped from his waistcoat-pocket and, striking a pebble, broke. This sign of ill luck made a great impression on him. He cast a suspicious look around him and, shivering with nervousness, as if he felt threatened by the invisible powers, he muttered:

"I'm afraid . . . I'm afraid. . . . Let's go away——"

HIS watch now marked half past four. He took his jacket from the shrub on which he had hung it, slipped his arms into the sleeves and put his hand in the right-hand outside pocket, where he had placed the pocketbook containing his papers.

"Hullo!" he said in great surprise. "I was sure I had——"

He felt in the left outside pocket; then in the handkerchief-pocket; then, with feverish excitement, in both the inside pockets. The pocketbook was not there. And, to his extreme amazement, all the other things which he was absolutely certain that he had left in the pockets of his jacket were gone—his cigarette-case, his box of matches, his note-book.

He was flabbergasted. His features became distorted. He spluttered incomprehensible words, while the most terrible thought took hold of his mind so forcibly as to become a reality—there was some one within the precincts of the Old Castle!

There was some one within the precincts of the Old Castle! And this some one was now hiding near the ruins—in the ruins perhaps! And this some one had seen him! And this some one had witnessed the death of Arsène Lupin and the death of Florence Levasseur! And this some one, taking advantage of his heedlessness and knowing from his words that the papers existed, had searched his jacket and rifled the pockets!

His eyes expressed the alarm of a man accustomed to work in the darkness unperceived and who suddenly becomes aware that another's eyes have surprised him at his hateful task and that he is being watched in every movement for the first time in his life.

Whence did that look come that troubled him as the daylight troubles a bird of the night? Was it an intruder hiding there by accident, or an enemy bent upon his destruction? Was it an accomplice of Arsène Lupin, a friend of Florence, one of the police? And was this adversary satisfied with his stolen booty, or was he preparing to attack him?

The cripple dared not stir. He was there, exposed to assault, on open ground, with nothing to protect him against the blows that might come before he even knew where the adversary was.

At last, however, the imminence of the danger gave him back some of his strength. Still motionless, he inspected his surroundings with an attention so keen that it seemed as if no detail could escape him. He would have sighted the most indistinct shape among the stones of the ruined pile, or in the bushes, or behind the tall, laurel screen.

Seeing nobody, he came along, supporting himself on his crutch. He walked without the least sound of his feet or of the crutch, which probably had a rubber shoe at the end of it. His raised right hand held a revolver. His finger was on the trigger. The least effort of his will, or even less than that, a spontaneous injunction of his instinct, was enough to put a bullet into the enemy.

He turned to the left. On this side, between the extreme end of the laurels and the first fallen rocks, there was a little brick path which was more likely the top of a buried wall. The cripple followed this path, by which the enemy might have reached the shrub on which the jacket hung, without leaving any traces.

The last branches of the laurels were in his way; he pushed them aside. There was a tangled mass of bushes. To avoid this he skirted the foot of the mound, after which he took a few more steps, going around a huge rock. And then, suddenly, he started back and almost lost his balance, while his crutch fell to the ground and his revolver slipped from his hand.

What he had seen, what he saw, was certainly the most terrifying sight that he

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could possibly have beheld. Opposite him, at ten paces distance, with his hands in his pockets, his feet crossed and one shoulder resting lightly against the rocky wall, stood, not a man; it was not a man and could not be a man, for this man, as the cripple knew, was dead—had died the death from which there is no recovery. It was therefore a ghost; and this apparition from the tomb raised the cripple's terror to its highest pitch.

He shivered, seized with a fresh attack of fever and weakness. His dilated pupils stared at the extraordinary phenomenon. His whole being, filled with demoniacal superstition and dread, crumpled up under the vision to which each second lent an added horror.

Incapable of flight, incapable of defense, he dropped upon his knees. And he could not take his eyes from that dead man, whom hardly an hour before he had buried in the depths of a well under a shroud of iron and granite.

Arsène Lupin's ghost!

A man you take aim at, you fire at you, kill. But a ghost! A thing which no longer exists and which nevertheless disposes of all the supernatural powers! What was the use of struggling against the infernal machinations of that which is no more? What was the use of picking up the fallen revolver and leveling it at the intangible spirit of Arsène Lupin?

And he saw an incomprehensible thing occur. The ghost took its hands out of its pockets. One of them held a cigarette-case; and the cripple recognized the same gunmetal case for which he had hunted in vain. There was therefore not a doubt left that the creature who had ransacked the jacket was the very same who now opened the case, picked out a cigarette and struck a match taken from a box which also belonged to the cripple!

Oh miracle! A real flame came from the match! Oh incomparable marvel! Clouds of smoke rose from the cigarette—real smoke, of which the cripple at once knew the particular smell!

HE HID his head in his hands. He refused to see more. Whether ghost or optical illusion, an emanation from another world or an image born of his remorse and proceeding from himself, it should torture his eyes no longer.

But he heard the sound of a step approaching him, growing more and more distinct as it came closer! He felt a strange presence moving near him! An arm was stretched out! A hand fell on his shoulder! That hand clutched his flesh with an irresistible grip! And he heard words spoken by a voice which, beyond mistake, was the human and living voice of Arsène Lupin!

"Why, my dear sir, what a state we're getting ourselves into! Of course, I understand that my sudden return seems an unusual and even an inconvenient proceeding, but still it does not do to be so uncontrollably impressed. Men have seen much more extraordinary things than that, such as Joshua staying the sun, and more sensational disasters, such as the Lisbon earthquake of 1755.

"The wise man reduces events to their proper proportions and judges them, not by their action upon his own destiny, but by the way in which they influence the fortunes of the world. Now confess that your little mishap is purely individual and does not affect the equilibrium of the solar system. You know what Marcus Aurelius says, on page 84 of Charpentier's edition——"

The cripple had plucked up courage to raise his head; and the real state of things now became so obviously apparent that he could no longer get away from the undeniable fact: Arsène Lupin was not dead! Arsène Lupin, whom he had hurled into the bowels of the earth and crushed as surely as an insect is crushed with a hammer—Arsène Lupin was not dead!

How to explain so astounding a mystery the cripple did not even stop to wonder. One thing alone mattered: Arsène Lupin was not dead. Arsène Lupin looked and spoke as a living man does. Arsène Lupin was not dead. He breathed, he smiled, he talked, he lived!

And it was so certainly life that the scoundrel saw before him that, obeying a sudden impulse of his nature and of his hatred for life, he flattened himself to his full length, reached his revolver, seized it and fired.

He fired; but it was too late. Don Luis had caused the weapon to swerve with a kick of his boot. Another kick sent it flying out of the cripple's hand.

The villain ground his teeth with fury and, his face contorted with rage, began hurriedly to fumble in his pockets.

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"Is this what you're looking for, sir?" asked Don Luis, holding up a hypodermic syringe filled with a yellow fluid. "Excuse me; but I was afraid lest you should prick yourself by mistake. That would have been a fatal prick, would it not? And I should never have forgiven myself."

The cripple was disarmed. He hesitated for a moment, surprised that the enemy did not attack him more violently, and sought to profit by the delay. His small, blinking eyes wandered around him, looking for something to throw. But an idea seemed to strike him and to restore his confidence little by little; and, in a new and really unexpected fit of delight, he indulged in one of his loudest chuckles.

"And what about Florence?" he shouted. "Don't forget Florence! For I've got you there! I can miss you with my revolver and you can steal my poison; but I have another means of hitting you, right in the heart. You can't live without Florence, can you? Florence's death means your own sentence, doesn't it? If Florence is dead you'll put the rope around your own neck, won't you, won't you, won't you?"

"Yes. If Florence were to die, I could not survive her."

"She is dead!" cried the scoundrel with a renewed burst of merriment, hopping about on his knees. "She's dead—quite, quite dead! What am I saying? She's more than dead! A dead person retains the appearance of a live one for a time, but this is much better. There's no corpse here, Lupin; just a mess of flesh and bone!

"The whole scaffolding of rocks has come down on top of her! You can picture it, eh? What a sight! Come, quick; it's your turn to kick the bucket. Would you like a length of rope? Ha, ha, ha! It's enough to make one die with laughing. Didn't I say that you'd meet at the gates of hell? Quick; your sweetheart's waiting for you! Do you hesitate? Where's your old French politeness? You can't keep a lady waiting, you know. Hurry up, Lupin! Florence is dead!"

He said this with real enjoyment, as if the mere word of death appeared to him delicious.

Don Luis had not moved a muscle. He simply nodded his head and said—

"What a pity!"

The cripple seemed petrified. All his joyous contortions, all his triumphal pantomime, stopped short. He blurted out:

"Eh? What did you say?"

"I say," declared Don Luis, preserving his calm and courteous demeanor and refraining from echoing the cripple's familiarity, "I say, my dear sir, that you have done very wrong. I never met a finer nature nor one more worthy of esteem than that of Mlle. Levasseur. The incomparable beauty of her face and figure, her youth, her charm—all these deserved a better treatment. It would indeed be a matter for regret if such a masterpiece of womankind had ceased to be."

The cripple remained astounded. Don Luis' serene manner dismayed him. He said in a blank voice:

"I tell you, she has ceased to be. Haven't you seen the grotto? Florence no longer exists!"

"I refuse to believe it," said Don Luis quietly. "If that were so, everything would look different. The sky would be clouded; the birds would not be singing; and Nature would wear her mourning garb. But the birds are singing; the sky is blue; everything is as it should be; the honest man is alive, and the rascal is crawling at his feet. How could Florence be dead?"

A LONG silence followed upon these words. The two enemies, at three paces' distance, looked into each other's eyes—Don Luis still as cool as ever, the cripple a prey to the maddest anguish. The monster understood. Obscure as the truth was, it shone forth before him with all the light of a blinding certainty: Florence also was alive! Humanly and physically speaking, the thing was not possible; but the resurrection of Don Luis was likewise an impossibility; and yet Don Luis was alive, with not a scratch on his face, with not a speck of dust on his clothes.

The monster felt himself lost. The man who held him in the hollow of his implacable hand was one of those men whose power knows no bounds. He was one of those men who escape from the jaws of death and who triumphantly snatch from death those of whom they have taken charge.

The monster retreated, dragging himself slowly backward on his knees along the little brick path.

He retreated. He passed by the confused heap of stones that covered the place where the grotto had been and did not turn

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his eyes in that direction, as if he were definitely convinced that Florence had come forth safe and sound from the appalling sepulcher.

He retreated. Don Luis, who no longer had his eyes fixed on the monster, was unwinding a coil of rope which he had picked up and seemed to pay no further attention to the other.

He retreated.

And suddenly, after a glance at his enemy, he spun around, drew himself up on his slack legs with an effort and started running toward the well.

He was twenty paces from it. He covered one-half, three-quarters of the distance. Already the mouth opened before him. He put out his arms with the movement of a man about to dive, and shot forward.

His rush was stopped. He rolled over the ground, dragged back violently, with his arms fixed so firmly to his body that he was unable to stir.

It was Don Luis, who had never wholly lost sight of him, who had made a slip-knot to the rope and who had lassoed the cripple at the moment when he was going to fling himself down the abyss. The cripple struggled for a few moments. But the slip-knot bit into his flesh. He ceased moving. Everything was over.

Then Don Luis Perenna, holding the other end of the lasso, came up to him and bound him hand and foot with what remained of the rope. The operation was carefully performed. Don Luis repeated it time after time, using the coils of rope which the cripple had brought to the well and gagging him with a handkerchief. And, while applying himself to his work, Don Luis explained with affected politeness:

"You see, sir, people always come to grief through excessive self-confidence. They never imagine that their adversaries can have resources which they themselves do not possess. For instance, when you got me to fall into your trap how could you have supposed, my dear sir, that a man like myself, a man like Arsène Lupin, hanging on the brim of a well, with his arms resting on the brim and his feet against the inner wall, would allow himself to drop down it like the first silly fool that comes along?

"Look here: You were fifteen or twenty yards away; and do you think that I had not the strength to leap out nor the courage to face the bullets of your revolver, when it was a question of saving Florence Levasseur's life and my own? Why, my poor sir, the tiniest effort would have been enough, believe me!

"My reason for not making the effort was that I had something better to do, something infinitely better. I will tell you why; that is, if you care to know. Do you?

"Well, then, at the very first moment my knees and feet, propped against the inner wall, had smashed in a thick layer of plaster which closed up an old excavation in the well; and this I at once perceived. It was a stroke of luck, wasn't it? And it changed the whole situation. My plan was settled at once. While I went on acting my little part of the gentleman about to tumble down an abyss, putting on the most scared face, the most staring eyes, the most hideous grin, I enlarged that excavation, taking care to throw the chunks of plaster in front of me in such a way that their fall made no noise. When the moment came, at the very second when my swooning features vanished before your eyes, I simply jumped into my retreat, thanks to a rather plucky little wriggle of the loins.

"I was saved, because the retreat was dug out on the side where you were moving and because, being dark itself, it cast no light. All that I now had to do was to wait.

"I listened quietly to your threatening speeches. I let the things you flung down the well go past me. And, when I thought you had gone back to Florence, I was preparing to leave my refuge, to return to the light of day and to fall upon you from behind, when——"

Don Luis turned the cripple over, as if he were a parcel which he was tying up with string, and continued:

"Have you ever been to Tancarville, the old feudal castle in Normandy, on the banks of the Seine? Haven't you? Well, you must know that, outside the ruins of the keep, there is an old well which, like many other wells of the period, possesses the peculiarity of having two openings, one at the top, facing the sky, and the other a little lower down, hollowed out sidewise in the wall and leading to one of the rooms of the keep.

"At Tancarville this second opening is nowadays closed with a grating. Here it was walled up with a layer of small stones and plaster. And it was just the recollection of Tancarville that made me stay, all

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the more as there was no hurry, since you had had the kindness to inform me that Florence would not join me in the next world until four o'clock. I therefore inspected my refuge and soon realized that, as I had already felt by intuition, it was the foundation of a building which was now demolished and on the ruins of which the garden had been laid out.

"Well, I went on, groping my way and following the direction which, above ground, would have taken me to the grotto. My presentments were not deceived. A gleam of daylight made its way at the top of a staircase of which I had struck the bottom step. I went up it and heard the sound of your voice."

Don Luis turned the cripple over and over and was pretty rough about it. Then he resumed:

"I wish to impress upon you, my dear sir, that the upshot would have been exactly similar if I had attacked you directly and from the start in the open air. But having said this, I confess that chance favored me to some purpose. It has often failed me in the course of our struggle, but this time I had no cause to complain.

"I felt myself in such luck that I never doubted for a second that, having found the entrance to the subterranean passage, I should also find the way out. As a matter of fact I had only to pull gently at the slight obstacle of a few stacked bricks which hid the opening in order to make my exit amid the remains of the castle keep.

"Guided by the sound of your voice, I slipped through the stones and thus reached the back of the grotto in which Florence lay. Amusing, wasn't it?

"You can imagine what fun it was to hear you make your little speeches: 'Answer me, yes or no, Florence. A movement of your head will decide your fate. If it's yes, I shall release you. If it's no, you die. . . . Answer me, Florence! A sign of your head: Is the answer yes or no?' And the end above all was delicious, when you scrambled to the top of the grotto and started roaring from up there: 'It's you who have asked to die, Florence. . . . You asked for it and you've got it!'

"Just think what a joke it was: At that moment there was no one in the grotto! Not a soul! With one effort I had drawn Florence toward me and put her under shelter. And all that you were able to crush with your avalanche of rocks was one or two spiders, perhaps, and a few flies dozing on the flagstones.

"The trick was done and the farce was nearly finished. Act first: Arsène Lupin saved. Act second: Florence Levasseur saved. Act third and last: The monster vanquished . . . absolutely and with a vengeance!"

DON LOUIS stood up and contemplated his work with a satisfied eye.

"You look like a sausage, my son!" he cried, yielding at last to his sarcastic nature and his habit of treating his enemies familiarly. "A regular sausage! A little thin, perhaps; a saveloy for poor people! But there, you don't much care what you look like, I suppose? Besides, you're rather like that at all times; and in any case you're just the thing for the little display of indoor gymnastics which I have in mind for you. You'll see! It's an idea of my own, a really original idea. Don't be impatient; we sha'n't be long!"

He took one of the guns which the cripple had brought to the well and tied to the middle of the gun the end of a twelve or fifteen yards' length of rope, fastening the other end to the cords with which the cripple was bound, just behind his back. He next took his captive around the body and held him over the well.

"Shut your eyes if you feel at all giddy. And don't be frightened. I'll be very careful. Ready?"

He put the cripple down the yawning hole and next took hold of the rope which he had just fastened. Then, little by little, inch by inch, cautiously, so that it should not knock against the sides of the well, the bundle was let down at arm's length.

When it reached a depth of twelve yards or so the gun stopped its farther descent and there it remained, slung in the dark and in the exact center of the narrow circumference.

Don Luis set light to a number of pieces of paper, which went whirling down, shedding their sinister gleams upon the walls. Then, unable to resist the craving for a last speech, he leaned over as the scoundrel had done, and grinned:

"I selected the place with care, so that you shouldn't catch cold. I'm bound to

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look after you, you see. I promised Florence that I wouldn't kill you; and I promised the French Government to hand you over alive as soon as possible. Only, as I didn't know what to do with you until tomorrow morning, I've hung you up in the air.

"It's a pretty trick, isn't it? And you ought to appreciate it, for it's so like your own way of doing things. Just think; the gun is resting on its two ends, with hardly an inch to spare. So, if you start wriggling, or moving, or even breathing too hard, either the barrel or the butt-end'll give way; and down you go! As for me, I've nothing to do with it!

"If you die, it'll be a pretty little case of suicide. All you've got to do, old boy, is to keep quiet. And the beauty of my little contrivance is that it will give you a foretaste of the few nights that will precede your last hour, when they cut off your head. From this moment forward you are alone with your conscience, face to face with what you perhaps call your soul, without anything to disturb your silent soliloquy. It's nice and thoughtful of me, isn't it? . . .

"Well, I'll leave you. And remember! Not a movement, not a sigh, not a wink, not a throb of the heart! And, above all, no tricks! If you start any funny business you're in the soup. Meditate: that's the best thing you can do. Meditate and wait. Good-by—for the present!"

And Don Luis, satisfied with his homily, went off, muttering:

"That's all right. I won't go so far as Eugène Sue, who says that great criminals should have their eyes put out. But all the same a little corporal punishment, nicely seasoned with fear, is right and proper and good for the health and morals."

DON LUIS walked away and, taking the brick path around the ruins, turned down a little road, which ran along the outer wall to a clump of fir trees where he had brought Florence for shelter.

She was waiting for him, still aching from the horrible suffering which she had endured, but already in full possession of her pluck, mistress of herself and apparently rid of all anxiety as to the issue of the fight between Don Luis and the cripple.

"It's finished," he said simply. "Tomorrow I will hand him over to the police."

She shuddered. But she did not speak; and he observed her in silence.

It was the first time that they were alone together since they had been separated by so many tragedies and next hurled against each other like sworn enemies. Don Luis was so greatly excited that in the end he could utter only insignificant sentences, having no connection with the thoughts that came rushing through his mind.

"We shall find the motor-car if we follow this wall and then strike off to the left. . . . Do you think you can manage to walk so far? . . . When we're in the car we'll go to Alençon. . . . There's a quiet hotel close to the chief square. . . . You can wait there until things take a more favorable turn for you . . . and that won't be long, as the criminal is caught."

"Let's go," she said.

He dared not offer to help her. For that matter, she stepped out firmly and her graceful body swung from her hips with the same even rhythm as usual. Don Luis once again felt all his old admiration and all his ardent love for her. And yet that had never seemed more remote than at this moment when he had saved her life by untold miracles of energy.

She had not vouchsafed him a word of thanks nor yet one of those milder glances which reward an effort made; and she remained the same as on the first day—the mysterious creature whose secret soul he had never understood and upon whom not even the storm of terrible events had cast the faintest light.

What were her thoughts? What were her wishes? What aim was she pursuing? These were obscure problems which he could no longer hope to solve. Henceforth each of them must go his own way in life and each of them could only remember the other with feelings of anger and spite.

"No!" he said to himself as she took her place in the limousine. "No! The separation shall not take place like that. The words that have to be spoken between us shall be spoken; and, whether she wishes or not, I will tear the veil that hides her."

THE journey did not take long. At Alençon Don Luis entered Florence in the visitors' book under the first name that occurred to him and left her to herself. An hour later he came and knocked at her door.

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This time again he had not the courage at once to ask her the question which he had made up his mind to put to her. Besides, there were other points which he wished to clear up.

"Florence," he said, "before I hand over that man, I should like to know what he was to you."

"A friend, an unhappy friend, for whom I felt pity," she declared. "I find it difficult today to understand my compassion for such a monster. But some years ago, when I first met him, I became attached to him because of his wretchedness, his physical weakness, and all the symptoms of death which he bore upon him even then. He had the opportunity of doing me a few services; and, though he led a hidden life, which worried me in certain respects, he gradually and without my knowing it acquired a considerable influence over me.

"I believed in his insight, in his will, in his absolute devotion; and when the Mornington case started it was he, as I now realize, who guided my actions and later those of Gaston Sauverand. It was he who compelled me to practise lying and deceit, persuading me that he was working for Marie Fauville's safety. It was he who inspired us with such suspicion of yourself and who taught us to be so silent, where he and his affairs were concerned, that Gaston Sauverand did not even dare mention him in his interview with you.

"I don't know how I can have been so blind. But it was so. Nothing opened my eyes. Nothing made me suspect for a moment that harmless, ailing creature, who spent half his life in hospitals or nursing-homes, who underwent every possible sort of operation and who, if he did sometimes speak to me of his love, must have known that he could not hope to——"

Florence did not finish her sentence. Her eyes had encountered Don Luis' eyes; and she received a deep impression that he was not listening to what she said. He was looking at her; and that was all. The words she uttered passed unheard.

To Don Luis any explanation concerning the tragedy itself mattered nothing, so long as he was not enlightened on the one point that interested him—on Florence's private thoughts about himself; thoughts of aversion, of contempt. Outside that, anything that she could say was vain and tedious.

He went up to her and in a low voice said—

"Florence, you know what I feel for you, do you not?"

She blushed, taken aback, as if the question were the very last that she expected to hear. Nevertheless she did not lower her eyes; and she answered, frankly—

"Yes, I know."

"But perhaps," he continued more eagerly, "you do not know how deeply I feel it? Perhaps you do not know that my life has no other aim but you?"

"I know that also," she said.

"Then, if you know it," he said, "I must conclude that it was just that which caused your hostility to me. From the beginning I tried to be your friend and I tried only to defend you. And yet from the beginning I felt that for you I was the object of an aversion that was both instinctive and deliberate. Never did I see in your eyes anything but coldness, dislike, contempt and even repulsion.

"At moments of danger, when your life or your liberty was at stake, you risked committing any imprudence rather than accept my assistance. I was the enemy, the man to be distrusted, the man capable of every infamy, the man to be avoided and to be thought of only with a sort of dread. Isn't that hatred? Is there anything but hatred to explain such an attitude?"

Florence did not answer at once. She seemed to be putting off the moment at which to speak the words that arose to her lips. Her face, thin and drawn with weariness and pain, was gentler than usual.

"Yet," she said, "there are other things than hatred to explain that attitude."

Don Luis was dumfounded. He did not quite understand the meaning of the reply; but Florence's tone of voice disconcerted him beyond measure, and he also saw that Florence's eyes no longer wore their usual scornful expression and that they were filled with smiling charm. And it was the first time that Florence had smiled in his presence.

"Speak, speak, I entreat you!" he stammered.

"I mean to say that there is another feeling which explains coldness, mistrust, fear and hostility. It is not always those whom we detest that we avoid with the greatest fear; and if we avoid them it is often

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because we are afraid of ourselves, because we are ashamed, because we rebel and want to resist and want to forget and can not—"

She stopped; and when he wildly stretched out his arms to her, as if beseeching her to say more and still more, she nodded her head, thus telling him that she need not go on speaking for him to read to the very bottom of her soul and discover the secret of love which she kept hidden there.

Don Luis staggered on his feet. He was intoxicated with happiness—suffered almost physical pain from that unexpected happiness. After the horrible minutes through which he had passed amid the impressive surroundings of the Old Castle, it appeared to him madness to admit that such extraordinary bliss could suddenly blossom forth in the commonplace setting of that room at a hotel.

He could have longed for space around him—forests, mountains, moonlight, a radiant sunset, all the beauty and all the poetry of the earth. With one rush he had reached the very acme of happiness. Florence's very life came before him, from the instant of their meeting to the tragic moment when the cripple, bending over her and seeing her eyes filled with tears, had shouted:

"She's crying! She's crying! What madness! But I know your secret, Florence! And you're crying! Florence, Florence, you yourself want to die!"

It was a secret of love, a passionate impulse which, from the first day, had driven her all trembling toward Don Luis. Then it had bewildered her, filled her with fear, appeared to her as a betrayal of Marie and Sauverand and, by turns urging her toward and drawing her away from the man whom she loved and whom she admired for his heroism and loyalty, rending her with remorse and overwhelming her as if it were a crime, had ended by delivering her, feeble and disabled, to the diabolical influence of the villain who coveted her.

Don Luis did not know what to do, did not know in what words to express his rapture. His lips trembled. His eyes filled with tears. His nature prompted him to take her in his arms, to kiss her as a child kisses, full on the lips, with a full heart. But a feeling of intense respect paralyzed his yearning. And, overcome with emotion, he fell at Florence's feet, stammering words of love and adoration.

CHAPTER XXIII

LUPIN'S LUPINS

NEXT morning, a little before eight o'clock, Valenglay was talking in his own flat to the Prefect of Police. He asked:

"So you think as I do, my dear Prefect? He'll come?"

"I haven't the least doubt of it, Monsieur le Président. And he will come with the same punctuality as has been shown throughout this business. He will come, for pride's sake, at the last stroke of eight."

"You think so?"

"Monsieur le Président, I have been studying the man for months. As things now stand, with Florence Levasseur's life in the balance, if he has not smashed the villain whom he is hunting down, if he does not bring him back bound hand and foot, it will mean that Florence Levasseur is dead and that he, Arsène Lupin, is dead."

"Whereas Lupin is immortal," said Valenglay, laughing. "You're right. Besides, I agree with you entirely. No-one would be more astonished than I if our good friend be not here to the minute. You say you were rung up from Angers yesterday?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Président. My men had just seen Don Luis Perenna. He had gone in front of them, in an aeroplane. After that they telephoned to me again from Le Mans, where they had been searching a deserted coach-house."

"You may be sure that the search had already been made by Lupin and that we shall know the results. Listen—eight o'clock!"

At the same moment they heard the throbbing of a motor-car. It stopped outside the house; and the bell rang almost immediately after. Orders had been given beforehand. The door opened and Don Luis Perenna was shown in.

To Valenglay and the Prefect of Police his arrival was certainly not unexpected, for they had just been saying that they would have been surprised if he had not come. Nevertheless their attitude showed that astonishment which we all experience in the face of events that seem to pass the bounds of human possibility.

"Well?" cried the prime minister eagerly.

"It's done, Monsieur le Président."

"Have you collared the scoundrel?"

"Yes."

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"By Jove!" said Valenglay. "You're a fine fellow!" And he went on to ask: "An ogre, of course? An evil, undaunted brute?"

"No, Monsieur le Président; a cripple, a degenerate—responsible for his actions certainly, but a man in whom the doctors will find every form of wasting illness; disease of the spinal cord, tuberculosis and all the rest of it."

"And is that the man whom Florence Levasseur loved?"

"Monsieur le Président," Don Luis violently protested, "Florence never loved that wretch! She felt sorry for him, as any one would for a fellow creature doomed to an early death; and it was out of pity that she allowed him to hope that she might marry him later, at some time in the vague future."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Président; of that and of a good deal more besides, for I have the proofs in my hands." Without further preamble he continued: "Monsieur le Président, now that the man is caught it will be easy for the police to find out every detail of his life. But meanwhile I can sum up that monstrous life for you, looking only at the criminal side of it and passing briefly over three murders which have nothing to do with the story of the Mornington case.

"Jean Vernocq was born at Alençon and brought up at old M. Langernault's expense. He got to know the Dedessuslamare couple, robbed them of their money, and, before they had time to lodge a complaint against the unknown thief, took them to a barn in the village of Damigni, where, in their despair, stupefied and besotted with drugs, they hanged themselves.

"This barn stood in a property called the Old Castle, belonging to M. Langernault, Jean Vernocq's protector, who was ill at the time. After his recovery, as he was cleaning his gun, he received a full charge of shot in the abdomen. The gun had been loaded without the old fellow's knowledge. By whom? By Jean Vernocq, who had also emptied his patron's cash-box the night before. . . .

"In Paris, where he went to enjoy the little fortune which he had thus amassed, Jean Vernocq bought from some rogue of his acquaintance papers containing evidence of Florence Levasseur's birth and of her right to all the inheritance of the Roussel family and Victor Sauverand, papers which the friend in question had purloined from the old nurse who brought Florence over from America. By hunting around Jean Vernocq ended by discovering first a photograph of Florence and then Florence herself.

"He made himself useful to her and pretended to be devoted to her, giving up his whole life to her service. At that time he did not yet know what profit he could derive from the papers stolen from the girl or from his relations with her.

"SUDDENLY everything became different. An indiscreet word let fall by a solicitor's clerk told him of a will in Maître Lepertuis' drawer which would be interesting to look at. He obtained a sight of it by bribing the clerk, who has since disappeared, with a thousand-franc note. The will, as it happened, was Cosmo Mornington's; and in it Cosmo Mornington bequeathed his immense wealth to the heirs of his relatives the Roussel sisters and of Victor Sauverand. . . .

"Jean Vernocq saw his chance. A hundred million francs! To get hold of that sum, to obtain riches, luxury, power and the means of buying health and strength from the world's great healers, all that he had to do was first to put away the different persons who stood between the inheritance and Florence and then, when all the obstacles were overcome, to make Florence his wife. . . .

"Jean Vernocq went to work. He had found among the papers of Hippolyte Fauville's old friend Langernault particulars relating to the Roussel family and to the discord that reigned in the Fauville household. Five persons, all told, were in Vernocq's way: first, of course, Cosmo Mornington; next in the order of their claims, Hippolyte Fauville, his son Edmond, his wife Marie and his cousin Gaston Sauverand. . . .

"With Cosmo Mornington the thing was easy enough. Introducing himself to the American as a doctor, Jean Vernocq put poison into one of the vials which Mornington used for his hypodermic injections.

"But in the case of Hippolyte Fauville, whose good will he had secured through his acquaintance with old Langernault and over whose mind he soon obtained an

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extraordinary influence, he had a greater difficulty to contend with. Knowing on the one hand that the engineer hated his wife and on the other that he was stricken with a fatal disease, Vernocq took occasion to suggest to Fauville's terrified brain the incredible plan of suicide of which you were subsequently able to trace the Machiavellian execution.

"In this way and with a single effort, anonymously, so to speak, and without appearing in the business, without Fauville's even suspecting the action brought to bear upon him, Jean Vernocq procured the deaths of Fauville and his son and got rid of Marie and Sauverand by the devilish expedient of causing the charge of murder, of which no one could accuse him, to fall upon them. The plan succeeded.

"There was only one hitch at the time—the intervention of Inspector Vérot. Inspector Vérot died. And there was only one danger in the future—the intervention of myself, Don Luis Perenna, whose conduct Vernocq was bound to foresee, as I was the residuary legatee by the terms of Cosmo Mornington's will. This danger Vernocq tried to avert, first by giving me the house on the Place du Palais-Bourbon to live in and Florence Levasseur as a secretary; and next by making four attempts to have me assassinated by Gaston Sauverand. . . .

"He therefore held all the threads of the tragedy in his hands. Able to come and go as he pleased in my house, enforcing himself upon Florence and later upon Gaston Sauverand by the strength of his will and the cunning of his character, he was within sight of the goal.

"When my efforts succeeded in proving the innocence of Marie Fauville and Gaston Sauverand, he did not hesitate. Marie Fauville died; Gaston Sauverand died. . . .

"So everything was going well for him. The police pursued me. The police pursued Florence. No one suspected him. And the date fixed for the payment of the inheritance was at hand. . . .

"This was two days ago. At that time Jean Vernocq was in the midst of the fray. He was ill and had obtained admission to the nursing-home in the Avenue des Ternes. From there he conducted his operations, thanks to his influence over Florence Levasseur and to the letters addressed to the Mother Superior from Versailles. Acting under the Superior's orders and ignorant of the meaning of the step which she was taking, Florence went to the meeting at the Prefect's office and herself brought the documents relating to her.

"Meanwhile Jean Vernocq left the private hospital and took refuge near the Ile Saint-Louis, where he awaited the result of an enterprise which at the worst might tell against Florence, but which did not seem capable of compromising him in any case. . . .

"You know the rest, Monsieur le Président," said Don Luis, concluding his statement. "Florence, staggered by the sudden revelation of the part which she had unconsciously taken in the matter and especially by the terrible part played by Jean Vernocq, ran away from the nursing-home where the Prefect had brought her at my request. She had but one thought—to see Jean Vernocq, demand an explanation of him and hear what he had to say in his defense. That same evening he carried her away by motor on the pretense of giving her proofs on his innocence. That is all, Monsieur le Président."

VALENGLAY had listened with growing interest to this gruesome story of the most malevolent genius conceivable to the mind of man. And he heard it perhaps without too great disgust, because of the light which it threw by contrast upon the bright, easy, happy and spontaneous genius of the man who had fought for the good cause.

"And you found them?" he asked.

"At three o'clock yesterday afternoon, Monsieur le Président. It was time. I might even say that it was too late, for Jean Vernocq began by sending me to the bottom of a well and by crushing Florence under a mound of stones."

"Oh, so you're dead, are you?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Président."

"But why did that villain want to do away with Florence Levasseur? Her death destroyed his indispensable scheme of matrimony."

"It takes two to get married, Monsieur le Président. And Florence refused."

"Well?"

"Some time ago Jean Vernocq wrote a letter leaving all that he possessed to Florence Levasseur. Florence, moved by pity for him and not realizing the importance of what she was doing, wrote a similar letter

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leaving her property to him. This letter constitutes a genuine and indisputable will in favor of Jean Vernocq.

"As Florence was Cosmo Mornington's legal and settled heiress by the mere fact of her presence at the excecutors' meeting with the documents proving her descent from the Roussel family, her death caused her rights to pass to her own legal and settled heir.

"Jean Vernocq would have come into the money without the possibility of any litigation. And as you would have been obliged to discharge him after his arrest, for lack of evidence against him, he would have led a quiet life, with fourteen murders on his conscience—I have added them up—but with a hundred million francs in his pocket. To a monster of his stamp the one made up for the other."

"But do you possess all the proofs?" asked Valenglay eagerly.

"Here they are," said Perenna, producing the pocket-book which he had taken out of the cripple's jacket. "Here are letters and documents which the villain preserved, owing to a mental aberration common to all great criminals. Here, by good luck, is his correspondence with Hippolyte Fauville. Here is the original of the prospectus from which I learned that the house on the Place du Palais-Bourbon was for sale. Here is a memorandum of Jean Vernocq's journeys to Alençon to intercept Fauville's letters to old Langernault.

"Here is another memorandum showing that Inspector Vérot overheard a conversation between Fauville and his accomplice, that he shadowed Vernocq and robbed him of Florence Levasseur's photograph, and that Vernocq sent Fauville in pursuit of him. Here is a third memorandum, which is just a copy of the two found in the eighth volume of Shakespeare and which proves that Jean Vernocq, to whom that set of Shakespeare belonged, knew all about Fauville's machination. Here are his correspondence with Caceres, the Peruvian attaché, and the letters denouncing myself and Sergeant Mazeroux which he intended to send to the press. Here . . .

"But need I say more, Monsieur le Président? You have the complete evidence in your hands. The magistrates will find that all the accusations which I made yesterday before the Prefect of Police were strictly true."

"And he?" cried Valenglay. "The criminal? Where is he?"

"Outside in a motor-car—in his motor-car, rather."

"Have you told my men?" asked M. Desmalions anxiously.

"Yes, Monsieur le Préfet. Besides, the fellow is carefully tied up. Don't be alarmed. He won't escape."

"Well, you've foreseen every contingency," said Valenglay, "and the business seems to me to be finished. But there's one problem that remains unexplained—the one perhaps that interested the public most. I mean the marks of the teeth in the apple—the "Teeth of the Tiger" as they have been called, which were certainly Mme. Fauville's teeth, innocent though she was. Monsieur le Préfet declares that you have solved this problem."

"Yes, Monsieur le Président; and Jean Vernocq's papers prove that I was right. Besides, the problem is quite simple. The apple was marked with Mme. Fauville's teeth, but Mme. Fauville never bit the apple."

"Come, come!"

"Monsieur le Président, Hippolyte Fauville very nearly said as much when he mentioned this mystery in his posthumous confession."

"Hippolyte Fauville was a madman."

"Yes; but a lucid madman and capable of reasoning with the most appalling logic. Some years ago, at Palermo, Mme. Fauville had a very bad fall, hitting her mouth against the marble top of a table with the result that a number of her teeth, in both the upper and the lower jaw, were loosened. To repair the damage and to make the gold plate intended to strengthen the teeth—a plate which Mme. Fauville wore for several months—the dentist, as usual, took an impression of her mouth.

"M. Fauville happened to have kept the mold; and he used it to print the marks of his wife's teeth in the cake of chocolate shortly before his death and in the apple on the night of his death. When this was done, he put the mold with the other things which the explosion was meant to and did destroy."

Don Luis' explanation was followed by a silence. The thing was so simple that the Prime Minister was quite astonished. The whole tragedy, the whole charge, everything that had caused Marie's despair and death

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and the death of Gaston Sauverand—all this rested on an infinitely small detail which had occurred to none of the millions and millions of people who had interested themselves so enthusiastically in the mystery of the Teeth of the Tiger.

The Teeth of the Tiger! Everybody had clung stubbornly to an apparently invincible argument. As the marks on the apple and the print of Mme. Fauville's teeth were identical and as no two persons in the world were able, in theory or practise, to produce the same print with their teeth, Mme. Fauville must needs be guilty.

Nay more, the argument seemed so absolute that from the day on which Mme. Fauville's innocence became known the problem had remained unsolved, while no one seemed capable of conceiving the one paltry idea that it was possible to obtain the print of a tooth in another way than by a live bite of that same tooth!

"It's like the egg of Columbus," said Valenglay, laughing. "It had to be thought of."

"You are right, Monsieur le Président. People don't think of those things. Here is another instance: May I remind you that during the period when Arsène Lupin was known at the same time as M. Lenormand and as Prince Paul Sernine, no one noticed that the name Paul Sernine was merely an anagram of Arsène Lupin? Well, it's just the same today: Luis Perenna also is an anagram of Arsène Lupin. The two names are composed of the same eleven letters, neither more nor less. And yet, although it was the second time, nobody thought of making that little comparison. The egg of Columbus again! It had to be thought of!"

Valenglay was a little surprised at the revelation. It seemed as if that devil of a man had sworn to puzzle him up to the last moment and to bewilder him by the most unexpected sensational news. And how well this last detail depicted the fellow—a queer mixture of dignity and impudence, of mischief and simplicity, of smiling chaff and disconcerting charm; a sort of hero who, while conquering kingdoms by most incredible adventures, amused himself by mixing up the letters in his name so as to catch the public napping!

The interview was nearly at an end. Valenglay said to Perenna:

"Monsieur, you have done wonders in this business and ended by keeping your word and handing over the criminal. I also will keep my word. You are free."

"I thank you, Monsieur le Président. But what about Sergeant Mazeroux?"

"He will be released this morning. Monsieur le Préfet de Police has arranged matters so that the public do not know of the arrest of either of you. You are Don Luis Perenna. There is no reason why you should not remain Don Luis Perenna."

"And Florence Levasseur, Monsieur le Président?"

"Let her go before the examining magistrate of her own accord. He is bound to discharge her. Once free and acquitted of any charge or even suspicion, she will certainly be recognized as Cosmo Mornington's legal heiress and will receive the hundred millions."

"She will not keep it, Monsieur le Président."

"How do you mean?"

"Florence Levasseur doesn't want the money. It has been the cause of unspeakably awful crimes. She hates the very thought of it."

"What then?"

"Cosmo Mornington's hundred millions will be wholly devoted to making roads and building schools in the south of Morocco and the Northern Congo."

"In the Mauretanian Empire which you are giving us?" said Valenglay, laughing. "By Jove, it's a fine work and I second it with all my heart. An empire and an imperial budget to keep it up with! Upon my word, Don Luis has behaved well to his country and has handsomely paid the debts . . . of Arsène Lupin!"

A MONTH later Don Luis Perenna and Mazeroux embarked in the yacht which had brought Don Luis to France. Florence was with them. Before sailing they heard of the death of Jean Vernocq, who had managed to poison himself in spite of all the precautions taken to prevent him.

On his arrival in Africa Don Luis Perenna, Sultan of Mauretania, found his old associates and accredited Mazeroux to them and to his grand dignitaries. He organized the Government to follow on his abdication and precede the annexation of the new empire by France, and he had several secret interviews on the Moorish border with General Léauty, commanding

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the French troops, interviews in the course of which they thought out all the measures to be executed in succession so as to lend to the conquest of Morocco an appearance of facility which would otherwise be difficult to explain.

The future was now assured. Soon the thin screen of rebellious tribes standing between the French and the pacified districts would fall to pieces, revealing an orderly empire, provided with a regular constitution, with good roads, schools and courts of law—a flourishing empire in full working order.

Then, when his task was done, Don Luis abdicated.

THE HAS now been back for over two years. Every one remembers the stir caused by his marriage with Florence Levasseur. The controversy was renewed; and many of the newspapers clamored for Arsène Lupin's arrest. But what could the authorities do?

Although nobody doubted who he really was, although the name of Arsène Lupin and the name of Don Luis Perenna consisted of the same letters and people ended by remarking the coincidence, legally speaking Arsène Lupin was dead and Don Luis Perenna was alive; and there was no possibility of bringing Arsène Lupin back to life nor of killing Don Luis Perenna.

He is today living in the village of Saint-Maclou, among those charming valleys which run down to the Oise. Who does not know his modest little pink-washed house, with its green shutters and its garden filled with bright flowers? People make up parties to go there from Paris on Sundays, in the hope of catching a sight, through the elder hedges, of the man who was Arsène Lupin, or of meeting him in the village square.

He is there, with his hair just touched with gray, his still youthful features and a young man's bearing; and Florence is there too, with her pretty figure and the halo of fair hair around her happy face, unclouded by even the shadow of an unpleasant recollection.

Very often visitors come and knock at the little wooden gate. They are unfortunate people imploring the master's aid, victims of oppression, weaklings who have gone under in the struggle, reckless persons who have been ruined by their passions.

For all these Don Luis is full of pity. He gives them his full attention, the help of his far-seeing advice, his experience, his strength and even his time, disappearing for days and weeks to fight the good fight once more.

And sometimes also it is an emissary from the Prefect's office, or some subordinate of the police who comes to submit a complex case to his judgment. Here again Don Luis applies the whole of his wonderful mind to the business.

In addition to this, in addition to his old books on ethics and philosophy, to which he has returned with such pleasure, he cultivates his garden. He dotes on his flowers. He is proud of them. He takes prizes at the shows; and the success is still remembered of the treble carnation, streaked red and yellow, which he exhibited as the "Arsène carnation."

But he works hardest at certain large flowers that blossom in Summer. During July and the first half of August they fill two-thirds of his lawn and all the borders of his kitchen-garden. Beautiful, decorative plants, standing erect like flag-staffs, they proudly raise their spiky heads of all colors—blue, violet, mauve, pink, white.

They are lupins and they include every variety—Cruikshank's lupin, the two-colored lupin, the scented lupin and—the last to appear—Lupin's lupin. They are all there, resplendent, in serried ranks like an army of soldiers, each striving to outstrip the others and to hold up the thickest and gaudiest spike to the sun. They are all there; and, at the entrance to the walk that leads to their motley beds, is a streamer with this device, taken from an exquisite sonnet of José Maria de Heredia—

And in my kitchen-garden lupins grow.

You will say that this is a confession. But why not?

In the evening, when a few privileged neighbors meet at his house—the justice of the peace, the notary, Major Comte d'Astrignac, who has also gone to live at Saint-Maclou—Don Luis is not afraid to speak of Arsène Lupin.

"I used to see a great deal of him," he says. "He was not a bad man. I will not go so far as to compare him with the Seven Sages, nor even to hold him up as an example to future generations. But still we must judge him with a certain indulgence.

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"He did a vast amount of good and a moderate amount of harm. Those who suffered through him deserved what they got; and Fate would have punished them sooner or later, if he had not forestalled her. Between a Lupin who selected his victims among the ruck of wicked rich men and some big company-promoter who deliberately ruins numbers of poor people, would you hesitate for a moment? Does not Lupin come out best?

"And on the other hand, what a host of good actions! What countless proofs of disinterested generosity! A burglar? I admit it. A swindler? I don't deny it. He was all that. But he was something more than that. And while he amused the gallery with his skill and ingenuity, he aroused the general enthusiasm in other ways.

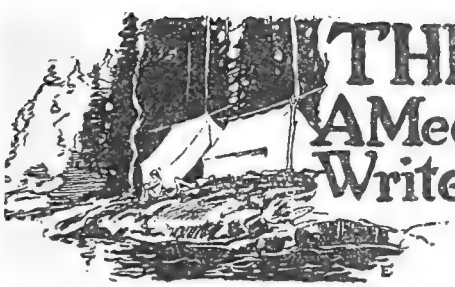
"People laughed at his practical jokes, but they loved his pluck, his courage, his adventurous spirit, his contempt for danger, his shrewd insight, his unfailing good humor, his reckless energy—all qualities that stood out at a period when the most active virtues of our race had reached their zenith, the period of the motor-car and the aeroplane. . . .

"'Some day', he said as a joke, 'I should like my epitaph to read, "Here lies Arsène Lupin, adventurer."' That was quite correct. He was a master of adventure.

"And if the spirit of adventure led him too often to put his hand in other people's pockets, it also led him to battle-fields where it gives, to those who are worthy to fight and win, titles of distinction which are not within reach of all. It was there that he gained his. It is there that you should see him at work, spending his strength, braving death and defying destiny. And it is because of this that you must forgive him, even if he did sometimes get the better of a commissary of police or steal the watch of an examining magistrate. Let us show some indulgence to our professors of energy."

And nodding his head, Don Luis concludes: "Then, you see, he had another virtue which is not to be despised. It is a virtue for which we should be grateful to him in these gray days of ours—he knew how to smile!"

THE END



THE CAMP-FIRE
A Meeting-Place for Readers, Writers and Adventurers.

BY THE time this reaches you, Captain W. Robert Foran, one of our writers and the man who took Roosevelt through Africa, and Dr. George A. Dorsey, curator of anthropology at the Field Museum of Natural History and professor of anthropology at the University of Chicago, both members of the Adventurers' Club of Chicago, will have started on a long exploring and scientific trip, to be gone anywhere from a year to a year and a half.

Captain Foran is well known to all of you through his stories and as a member of the Camp-Fire, with distinguished service in British East Africa back of him. He has been playing on a Chicago polo-team and expected to come to New York with it for some of the Eastern tournaments, but polo became tame to him as soon as this trip around the world took definite form.

I am awfully keen on it and it will be an adventure after my own heart. I can scarcely sit still and wait, as I am so keen to be off. Our itinerary is as follows: From San Francisco we go to Tahiti, Raratonga of the Cook Isles, New Zealand, and then Sydney. In Australia we cross the hitherto unexplored desert in the northern territory—three weeks without water. Then we go through New Guinea, Borneo, Sumatra, Java, and then to Manila. From here we go to Hong Kong, Shanghai, and through China. Then back to Singapore, and through Burma, India, Kashmir. Then to Ceylon and to Aden. Here I leave Dorsey and go through Abyssinia and back to Cairo. Then I go down the Cape-to-Cairo Railroad north to south. I shall run down through British East Africa to Mombasa, thence to Zanzibar, through Seyschelles and Mauritius, and to Madagascar, back to German East Africa and across that country and Lake Tanganyika to

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the mouth of the Congo River on the west coast, and then on back to the Cape-to-Cairo Railroad and to Cape Town. Then to London and back here.

They will take a moving-picture operator along and carry the Adventurers' Club flag wherever they go. Here's luck to them! And the Camp-Fire will be getting a line from them now and then on their travels just to keep us in touch with them.

SPEAKING of the Chicago Adventurers' Club, it's doing very nicely, thank you. The organization is stronger than ever and, as the end of its second year approaches, the interest and enthusiasm of the members are only the stronger and more lasting.

Among the Chicago honorary members are Colonel Theodore Roosevelt, ex-President of the United States, Colonel Sir Francis Younghusband of Tibet fame, James Sutherland, the famous elephant-hunter; Chief Lazy Boy of the Blackfeet tribe, and Captain G. H. Anderson, F. R. G. S., explorer and hunter. By this time Commander Edward R. G. R. Evans, R. N., C. B., who returned in command of the South Pole Expedition after the death of Commander Scott, has probably also become an honorary member.

FULL data on the Adventurers' Club will be sent from this office on request. The Club has no connection with the Camp-Fire or *Adventure*, but so many inquiries come in that we have arranged to send out this information.

A WORD from Allan Dunn in regard to his novelette in the last issue:

AS TO "The Greenstone Mask." The Maoris are pacified now—civilized or intimidated, as you will. Most of them are dying of consumption fast, owing to their wearing white man's clothes at the wrong time—an overcoat when it's hot and none when it rains. Descriptions of *pa*, customs, and of the big crater are from first hand. I covered the country mentioned. *Mauohi* was a real character. She actually stuck the iron rod in the neck of the chief who had killed her brother—after treating him as a distinguished guest—and drank the spouting blood. The materializing-*séance* is authentic. All cannibalistic rites of the Polynesians and other savages, by the bye, seemed to be based on the desire to acquire the merits of the dead.

There have been several white children adopted by the natives, often after raids. *Fragrance* was no exception. The hand-to-hand fighting with the whites among the palisaded lanes of the villages was of a most stubborn nature.

IT IS generally accepted that Schüssler's theory of the Polynesian migration is correct and that the Maoris came from Hawaii. The similarity of the language and customs is startling and the traditions most interesting. Curiously, the Hawaiians seem to have long lost the art of carving and tattooing.

The custom of drying heads in the smoke, stuffing them with tow and holding them as trophies is well known. The British Government put an end to all traffic of this kind, as it was getting to a point where a chance of selling a specimen head led to the indiscriminate killing of the first lonely native, and sometimes white man, who happened along. Ordinarily only heads with fine *moko*—tattooing—were preserved. Many museums have examples of the carefully and painfully decorated heads, scrolled and spiraled like a Persian rug-pattern. Tattooing was a public function enjoyed by all except the tattooee. The crowd sat around, improvised chants were sung and the patient joshed as the artist punched away with his green-stone mallet and chisel of a bird's pinion-bone.

A NEW member shakes hands with the Camp-Fire this month, though you have read his stories elsewhere and know that when Robert V. Carr writes about cowboys he is writing about something he knows at first hand. He has some things to say to you direct, but they happen to concern another story of his and I'll keep them till it appears.

In addition to having been a cowboy himself and having served in the Philippines, he has been farmhand, placer-miner, prospector, printer, country editor, magazine-publisher, traveling-man and editorial director of a metropolitan newspaper.

He knows the West. No doubt of that. "Triplets Triumphant" is a good picture as well as a good story.

HOW ABOUT THIS?

READ this letter from E. D. Cook, writing from Costa Rica. If at first the idea doesn't seem practical and valuable, then do a little thinking.

PORT LIMON, C. R.

The other suggestion is based on my belief that in ten years or less time the United States is going to find herself in a man-sized fight. I vote that all of us who are drifting around, and who would ordinarily volunteer to fight for our country, begin to form sort of a volunteer organization now through *Adventure*. Then, if something turns up, we can all get together and volunteer in a body. And the fellows who have fought with and against each other in some of the Spigotty wars, will go in together, knowing that every one in the outfit can obey orders and handle a gun. Personally, when I get into a scrap I like to know that the fellows with me are not going to go up in the air when they get in a tight place.

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It can be done. As a matter of fact it has already been done in Great Britain. It can be done in this country at least as well. And the need for it here is greater.

Compared to those of other Powers our standing Army is what might be called tiny. As the years go by several hundred thousand militia will be developed. For the rest, in case of war, we'd have to depend on volunteers, nearly all of them untrained.

As things now are, the only way you can get into a war is to enlist separately as individuals, in the militia, Army or volunteers, and be scattered through a thousand companies and regiments. Why not fix things in advance so that you can serve together in groups, with each man sure that his comrades can shoot, take care of themselves roughing it in the open, obey orders and, as Mr. Cook says, "not go up in the air when they get in a tight place"?

A "legion" of one or more regiments, each not exceeding 1,200 men, could be organized, but, as I understand the plans of the U. S. War College, such an organization wouldn't be accepted for service till after the regular Army and the militia of the whole country had been found insufficient, and volunteers had been called for. And volunteers are held back to be trained as long as possible before going into action.

THERE'S a quicker way of getting under fire, without tying yourself to peace duties with regular Army or militia.

The militia is being reorganized on a better and bigger basis. The country is now divided into twelve divisional districts, each containing twelve practical divisions. It will be easy to fill out the infantry complement of these divisions; but cavalry, field artillery, engineers, and sanitary complements will be lacking for years to come.

Enroll in companies of from 100 to 150 men, some companies engineers, some cavalry, some field artillery. Most of you are horsemen, there are several thousand engineers among you, many of you have handled machine-guns and heavier artillery, hosts of you have served in the army or navy of at least one country. When war breaks out offer these companies to the War Department to supply the missing units in the various divisions. Being bodies of men already largely qualified as soldiers and trained for the above special need, your services would be eagerly accepted.

Organize, also, one or more infantry regiments to be mustered in later, as were the Rough Riders.

Here is a chance for you of the Camp-Fire to do a big thing. Ordinarily it would be next to impossible, for you are scattered all over the world. But this Camp-Fire of ours does away with that objection by giving all of you a meeting-place, the chance to exchange views and get together.

TALK it over with others who are the right sort. *Adventure* will help in any way it can—keep a roster of those ready to enlist, give all the room it can to discussions, plans, communications, bulletins, etc. But such an organization will be bigger than any magazine and ought not to be limited or trade-marked by *Adventure* or any other publication. Use *Adventure* to get the Legion on its feet and then let it stand on those feet.

THE Legion should be so organized that it interferes in no way with the free movements of its members in time of peace. There should be no dues or fees worthy of the name; no expenses should arise that a joining-fee of twenty-five cents could not cover; duties of officers would be confined to keeping the roll of names and addresses. Members would report by mail, without being notified, as soon as hostilities became probable.

The most vital point in organizing would be making sure that only the right kind of men were admitted. Would probably be best to start by companies with a small nucleus of men who know one another's records and then enroll only those personally vouched for by one or more members. Officers should be chosen from among those most widely and favorably known—men other men are ready to trust and follow from the start to the end.

THE "Camp-Fire" will do all it can to help, for it is the only means in the world for bringing you all together, but it will assume no authority or responsibility. *Adventure* will do all it can for the Legion, but the Legion need do nothing whatever for *Adventure*.

And that Legion can be made a wonder! Perhaps no one else knows so well as I how many thousands and thousands of real adventurers there are. Out of them could

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be formed a Legion that would fight itself through any troops that ever lived. And they couldn't be sent to any spot on earth where some of them wouldn't know the ground, speak the language and know how to meet the climate. A seasoned bunch of good all-around fighting-men ready to pitch in when the first gun is fired and make a proud name for themselves in valuable service to their country.

Think over this suggestion of Mr. Cook's. Get in touch with one another on this through the "Camp-Fire," and "start something!" Where's a leader?

HERE, again, is the brief explanation of our identification-cards. They are offered free of charge to any of you. All we ask is that you comply carefully with the simple directions as they appear below in italics:

The cards bear this inscription, printed in English, French, Spanish, German, Portuguese, Dutch, Italian, Arabic, Chinese, Russian, and Japanese:

"In case of death or serious emergency to bearer, address serial number of this card, care of *Adventure*, New York, U. S. A., stating full particulars, and friends will be notified."

In our office, under each serial number, will be registered the name of bearer and of one friend, with permanent address of each. No name appears on the card. Letters will be forwarded to friend, unopened by us. The names and addresses will be treated as confidential by us. We assume no other obligations. Cards not for purposes of business identification. Later, arrangements may perhaps be made for money deposits to cover cable or telegraph notifications. Cards furnished free of charge, *provided stamped and addressed envelope accompanies application. Send no applications without the two names and two addresses in full.* We reserve the right to use our own discretion in all matters pertaining to these cards.

Later, for the cost of manufacture, we may furnish, instead of the above cards, a card or tag of aluminum, proof against heat, water and general wear and tear, for adventurers when actually in the jungle, desert, etc.

A moment's thought will show the value of this system of card-identification for any one, whether in civilization or out of it. Remember to furnish stamped and addressed envelope and to *give the two names and addresses in full when applying.*

THE following will explain why letters addressed to No. W 216, in the April issue, were not answered:

PRESTON, CUBA.

I received all your letters as well as the letters from the different comrades of the Camp-Fire who were so kind as to offer their services to me. The last I saw of those letters, however, they were being destroyed by a company of drunken Mexican soldiers. In order to explain this matter more fully I wish you would call up the ———— *Magazine* and ask them to let you read the proofs of my article on the Mexican situation.

I was the man who interpreted for Admiral Mayo during the Tampico flag incident; I was the man condemned to be shot as a spy, and was the man who led the party who were incarcerated in Cordoba jail. With the British flag wrapped about my waist, and with the representative of Sir Lionel Carden on one side, and Sir Christopher Craddock on the other side, I managed to make my escape. I think I had plenty of adventure, and for the time being I am not looking for any more.

As many of the applicants for this position had sent me photographs and clippings which they wished returned, I want you to understand that the failure to return them was not due to my negligence or carelessness. I wish to thank all the applicants, and would like to hear from them early. If they should write to me in care of your magazine I would be glad to go into further detail with them.

Trusting that you are well and happy and meeting with great success—No. W 216.

I was in New York eight hours, but could not get to see you as a clerk told me you were out. I went up as the representative of the Mexican refugees.

STILL another follows custom and introduces himself to the Camp-Fire along with the first story he gives us—Ross Ellis, his "Just Nuts" in this issue.

My very tame and unexciting career began in the town of Wapello, Iowa, on the morning of February 4, 1879. At the age of eleven I became a printer's devil, and for the next eight years was intermittently and interchangeably printer, hobo, reporter, laborer, stenographer, medical student, law student, and a good many more things. For several weeks I was a hypnotist's assistant, I have waited in a restaurant, and I once seriously considered being a preacher.

DURING the Spring and Summer of 1898 I fought mosquitoes and ate raisin pies at Camp Cuba Libre, Jacksonville, Fla. I was a private in Co. F, 50th Iowa Vol. Infantry, and I presume I did a certain amount of drilling, etc.; but after sixteen years the things that stand out most strongly in my memory are the mosquitoes (how they bit me!) and the raisin pies the sutler sold (how I bit them!). If Charlie Lightfoot, Frank Alden, Charlie Hunt, Bill Mitchell, or any others of my fellow "heroes" are alive, and should read this, they will remember those pies.

FOR the next ten years I was stenographer, office manager, salesman and sales manager in various branches of the iron and steel business in Chicago, Boston and New York. I was in the structural-steel business in the piratical days—those who were in it then will understand what I mean—got some insight into "high finance" during the boom times in the Boston copper-market, and took a flier in the mail-order business on the side.

In 1908 I bought an interest in a moribund bolt-and-nut-manufacturing company; was broke in six months, but didn't have sense enough to know it; followed the lure of a wonderful nut-making machine to Niagara Falls, and lost all the money I could borrow in an effort to train that wonderful machine to make nuts. In March, 1909, I struck Chicago, having pawned everything pawnable to pay my fare. Within a week I had a good job and was on my way back to prosperity.

FOR four years I sold pig-iron, earned a fair amount of money, paid for a good many "dead horses," and would probably be doing so still had I not, on May 26th, 1913, disputed the right of way with a *live* horse—attached to a deep-sea-going cab. Neither horse nor cab was injured.

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Five months later I emerged from hospital with a bad list to starboard and the knowledge that for a year, at least, I was incapacitated for business. This gave me a perfectly valid excuse to try my hand at the writing game—an ambition I had more or less secretly cherished since my ninth year, when the local paper printed my first poem.

If any one is sufficiently interested in my stories to write and tell me what rings true and what doesn't, what is lacking or what should be omitted, I'll rise up and call him (or her) blessed.

THE following are only samples of the many letters that come to us about "Lost Trails" and the identification-cards:

I HAVE heard from one S. F. out East, in China, that your magazine is issuing some kind of identification-cards, and that all you need are two addresses of my friends. I think the idea is a great one. Away out in the deserts of Mongolia I've seen the remains of white men, who needed cards like this on their last stand.

PAUL B. ROSENBERG, Moscow, Russia.

AS A result of your kindly publishing in "Lost Trails" my inquiry after old comrades in the B. S. A. P. 1896-97 campaign, I have much pleasure in letting you know that I have just received a letter from J. S. M. Cottrell, who is now in Pretoria, S. A. I have also heard that Corporal McEwen was killed by lions near Buluwayo. I must thank you for having enabled me to get in touch with old comrades. M. M. MARSDEN, Ladysmith, B. C.

HAVING just recovered from a long illness in South America, during which my friends lost all trace of me, I have learned what a great value one of your identification-cards would have been to me. Although I have been a reader of *Adventure* for a long time, I have never before written to you, but as I am soon to return to South America I will have something for the Camp-Fire boys that stay at home and dream.

CAPTAIN CHUCK CONNORS,
Chicago, Ill.

THE other day Ted Dickson, Jr., dropped in at the office and asked me to put him in touch with some one who could give him reliable information on Tibet. He and four other men, one or two of whom I know, are preparing to enter Tibet from the Chinese border and attempt to penetrate to Lassa. I turned him over to Gordon McCreagh ("Featuring Morton St. Clair" in this issue) as the only man I happened to know in New York who could give him any first-hand "dope" on Tibet.

Mr. Dickson told me he had just returned from the Balkans, and I suggested his hunting up Arthur D. Howden Smith, who, as you know, served with the Bulgarian *chetniks* against the Turks before the outbreak of the late war, keeps in very close touch with all matters pertaining to the Balkans, and opens a two-part story of Bulgaria in this number.

Mr. Dickson inquired for a third man also, a wireless telegrapher whom he knows and wants for his expedition and with whom I happened to be in touch through the magazine.

It is rather odd that two of the three men mentioned above have stories in the present issue, but the incident itself is merely typical of many cases. At times, the office becomes quite a medium of exchange for adventurers.

WHENEVER you want a back copy of *Adventure* it will save time if you send the fifteen cents direct to the Circulation Manager instead of to me. We still have copies of some of the back issues; others are completely exhausted. Among others, we have no back copies of the numbers containing Dr. Cochrane's stories of *Sled Wheeler*, except the June, 1914, issue ("A Drop of Doom"), and even that is going fast.

I'VE thought of another Camp-Fire department that will be of practical use to you—an Information Directory on the actual, practical field of adventure. In a small way we begin right now. Every Camp-Fire reader who can add something should do so to help his fellow members.

Remember two things. *First*, our space is very limited. Only items like those this month can be printed—standing sources of information. No room to ask or answer specific questions. *Second*, recommend no source of information you are not *sure* of. False information may cause serious loss, even loss of life.

ARTHUR SULLIVANT HOFFMAN

INFORMATION DIRECTORY

(See above)

For information and printed data on Central and South America, write John Barrett, Director General, Pan American Union, Wash., D. C. (The Union also publishes a magazine devoted to Latin America.)

For data on foreign countries in general, the Bureau of For. and Dom. Commerce, Wash., D. C.

For Alaska, Wm. T. Lott, Alaska Educational Service, Bureau of Education, Wash., D. C.; also the Alaska Bureau, Chamber of Commerce, Central Bldg., Seattle, Wash.

For the Philippines and Porto Rico, Bureau of Insular Affairs, War Dept., Wash., D. C.

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WANTED MEN

NOTE.—We offer this corner of the "Camp-Fire" free of charge to our readers. Naturally we can not vouch for any of the letters, the writers thereof, or any of the claims set forth therein, beyond the fact that we receive and publish these letters in good faith. We reserve the privilege of not publishing any letters or parts of a letter. Any inquiry for men sent to this magazine will be considered as intended for publication, at our discretion, in this department, with all names and addresses given therein printed in full, unless such inquiry contains contrary instructions. In the latter case we reserve the right to substitute for real names any numbers or other names. We are ready to forward mail through this office, but assume no responsibility therefor. **N.B.—Items asking for money rather than men will not be published.**

GOOD partner, about 25, with a little money, to go to South America to work rubber and prospect at the same time, starting about Nov. 1. Must be a good gold-miner and rifle-shot. I am 26, a good woodsman and rubber-worker, but know nothing of minerals. I have spent seven years in that country and know of some very good gold washes.

This trip shows good prospect of adventure, as I am going to the Chichiebo and Conebo Indian district in the river Aguatiea of Peru. Anybody that has been in that country knows what that means, and it takes a man that is no coward for this undertaking.—Address LEE ROY FOREST, 525 E. Orange St., Shurman, Texas.

WANT to get in touch with gentleman; must be good fellow. I am sergeant in the U. S. Cavalry, have been cavalryman for eleven years; served in three different armies. Am foreigner, age 29; character excellent and horsemanship the same; also a good shot. Time expires in September. Don't mind to go in danger; have been wounded three times; well educated; of an adventurous nature. Known pretty well in all North Africa, Asia and Europe.—Address NICHOLAS ELUSHEEN, 144 Maybury, Grand Ave., Detroit, Mich.

Inquiries for opportunities instead of men are NOT printed in this department.

ADVENTURER—civilian, not soldier of fortune—wants pal or pard to share in some pleasant and profitable team-work. Healthful and easy outdoor life—really a perpetual picnic. Travel, see world, do nothing unlawful or dishonorable, yet live well off those we meet along our way, who will both pay and thank us for what we impart. Describe self and accomplishments fully in first letter. If interested, write.—Address M. ORSER, R.F.D. No. 5, Lansing, Michigan.

MAN wanted to join expedition to Lhasa, the forbidden city of Tibet. Wireless operator who can handle battery set and who knows business thoroughly will get preference. Young man preferred. Must be able to handle rifle and six-gun. Expedition very dangerous. No salary attached, but probably something on side. Expenses paid from San Francisco and return. Rigid physical examination necessary.—Address W. No. 245.

INTEND to go to far country coming Winter to trap and hunt for season. Want party of seven or eight men who are 5 ft. 10 in. or over and weigh 150 pounds, who are in sound physical health and can be depended on to stick and make best of things. Prefer men familiar with trapping and hunting, and northern woods, if possible. Adventure-seekers need not reply, as we want to make this a profitable undertaking. All interested write.—Address AL MERCKEL, 221 East 86th Street, New York City.

A BURIED-TREASURE expedition that is to set sail this Fall wants several able-bodied young men with sea experience to help make up expedition. The information the writer has in regard to certain buried treasure is believed to be authentic. All letters considered confidential. Further particulars may be had.—Address S. C., care of *Adventure*.

OPPORTUNITY for several healthy, cultured ladies with some capital to join me on pre-empting land and starting big cattle-ranch in British Columbia. Only those who love an open-air life and are of robust physique need apply. Ladies not possessing much capital in dollars but in energy and willingness to *work* are equally eligible as those only possessing dollars. References given and required. Must be good-tempered and willing to be "fired" or "fined" on any display of discontent. If they feel ill-humored they can voluntarily exile themselves and go on a hunger-strike until killed or cured. A few days ought to decide symptoms and plans, and it will be expected of them either to quit growling or quit the ranch with all possible speed and grace. Writer knows the country and many other countries, and had decided on B. C. because of its sterling worth. Hunting, fishing, golfing, etc., will be available. Good houses can be built and good music, books, food, etc., obtained. A good enjoyable life rather than the amassing of mere lucre is the aim. No objection to suffragettes so long as they are young, strong and *not* militant.—Address MISS R. EVANS, care of *Adventure*, Spring and Macdougal Sts., New York City.

AM GOING on prospecting trip to Alaska. Would like to have good, reliable pal to go with me. One who has some experience in mining preferred. One not a boozer or bum, willing to do his fifty. Must have supplies, a revolver and rifle. Will answer questions as to where and how.—Address JOHN T. TIEBEN, 3552 Haven Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio.

LOST TRAILS

NOTE.—We offer this department of the "Camp-Fire" free of charge to those of our readers who wish to get in touch again with old friends or acquaintances from whom the years have separated them. For the benefit of the friend you seek, *give your own name if possible.* All inquiries along this line, unless containing contrary instructions, will be considered as intended for publication in full with inquirer's name, in this department, at our discretion. We reserve the right, in case inquirer refuses his name, to substitute any numbers or other names, to reject any item that seems to us unsuitable, and to use our discretion in all matters pertaining to this department. Give also your own full address. We will, however, forward mail through this office, assuming no responsibility therefor. We have arranged with the Montreal *Star* to give additional publication in their "Missing Relative Column," weekly and daily editions, to any of our inquiries for persons last heard of in Canada.

WILLIAM E. ALSTON left home at Sydenham, London, England. Last heard of ten years ago in Bombay, India, en route for China. No correspondence after leaving Bombay. Brother wants to know whereabouts.—Address E. ALSTON, 166 E. Superior Street, Chicago, Ill.

ROBERT OWEN. Bob, about 50 yrs. old, 5 ft. 6 in. Left Blackpool, England, with another man about 10 years ago. Both shoemakers. Probably went to New York or Montreal. Information or proof of death.—Address C. WILD, 12508 86th St., Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

ROY M. TREAT, inheritance awaiting him. Age 32 years; 6 ft., blue eyes, dark hair, stoop-shouldered; last heard of in Boisé, Idaho, five years ago.—Address ROBERT TREAT, Terry, Montana.

"SPADE TAIL" JOE BENNETT, George Ligars, "Chicken" Gardner, or any of bunch of 18th U. S. Infantry on Panay Island in '99-1900. Also Sergt. Behi, 18th Infantry.—Address HARRY K. GUIBBS and FRANK "CULLY" HINES, Tucumcari, New Mexico.

HARRY K. McCLINTOCK. Last heard of in Chicago. Height 6 ft. Gray eyes, black hair. Commonly called "Happy Hooligan." Worked for number of years on Fort Wayne Railroad. Is about 32 years old.—Address ALLAN BETHEL, Stag Hotel, Canton, Ohio.

ARCHIE COATSWORTH MELDRUM, late of Brazilian oil mills, engineer; last heard of in Gravenhurst, Canada, with lumber company. Any one knowing whereabouts write.—Address L. T. No. 246.

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$500.00 REWARD will be given for the discovery, living or dead, of Professor Cecil F. Lavell (formerly of Teachers College, Columbia University, New York) of Ohio State University of Columbus, Ohio, who while traveling lost his memory and identity at Hamilton, Canada, Monday, Nov. 24, 1913. Missing ever since.

Description: Age 41; height 5 ft. 10 in.; mole behind ear; teeth slightly gold-filled; dark hair, thin on top, slightly gray; prominent ears; prominent bumps over eyes, hollow temples, small brown mustache; prominent wrist-bones; slim build, weight 150 lbs.; dark blue eyes, may be wearing glasses; may not have been shaved since being lost; had quiet, pleasant gentlemanly manner, excellent habits and high character. When lost wore suit of gray diagonal cheviot, bought at Benjamin's, 5th Ave., New York, or David's, New York (name in coat pocket), also gray sweater coat; shoes, size 7 or 7½; collar 15½; size of hat 7⅛, also had Ryrie gun-metal watch.—Address MRS. C. F. LAVELL, 166 Walmer Road, Toronto, Canada.

DENNIS CHARLES O'CALLAGHAN, native of Scarriff, County Clare, Ireland. Graduate Rockwell College, Cahir, County Tipperary. Last heard of in Goldfield, Nevada, 1907.—Address M. P. O'CALLAGHAN, Athens, Ga.

Please notify us at once when you have found your man.

W. D. (BILLY) ALT, formerly of Corpus Christi. Last heard from leaving Buenos Ayres for Chili.—Address BURR SPRAGUE, 296 14th St., Milwaukee, Wis.

SAMUEL LEVY, left Philadelphia years ago. Went to Wilkesbarre, Pa., then to coal regions, upper Pennsylvania. Engaged in service Spanish American War, Philippines and Cuba. Want word. Write nephew. Older brother's name, Harris.—Address DR. J. LEVY, 2818 Frankford Ave., Philadelphia, Pa.

CORDIA GALLUP, my brother. Known as Leon Burt. Last heard from Salem, Ore., 1912.—Address R. H. GALLUP, 501 North 5th Avenue, Seattle, Wash.

DR. WALKER C. PENNOCK, graduate Philadelphia Dental College 1905. Chummed with me 1903 to 1905 at 239 N. 18th St. Would like to learn whereabouts or hear from him.—Address DR. J. LEVY, Dentist, 2818 Frankford Ave., Philadelphia, Pa.

Please notify us at once when you have found your man.

J. J. TROUGHTON, moonlight and scenic artist; left San Diego, Cal., three years ago for Vancouver, B. C.—Address L. M. SYLVESTER, 936 Union St., San Diego, Cal.

ABBEY OLSEN and Fred Beaver. If you see this, let me know where letter will reach you.—Address ARCADE STATION, Nashville, Tenn. Your pal Sandy.

ALLAN H. OWEN, last heard of Milwaukee, Wis. Word wanted by partner.—Address AL BERGER, Chickasaw Hotel, Hill Street, Los Angeles, Cal.

JOHN MEISEL, of Newark, N. J., disappeared in New York City about three years ago. 5 ft. 9 in., brown hair, dark complexion, 29 years old.—Address C. V. RUSSELL, U. S. S. Utah, Box 2, care of P. M., N. Y. City.

BARRETTE, MISS CORA MABEL, last heard of in San Bernardino, Cal. Married to Mr. E. L. Krushine. Information wanted by brother.—Address WALTER H. BARRETTE, Mare Island, Cal.

JAMES BROWN, my old pal, last heard of in Brantford, Canada. Please write.—Address LINDSLEY ROWE, New Smyrna, Fla.

GEORGE H. STEPHENSON, lawyer, last heard of at Bay St., Toronto. Any one knowing whereabouts please communicate.—Address L. T. No. 247.

DAVID H. CARR, my father; last heard from in Muskogee, Oklahoma.—Address DAVID W. CARR, 134 7th St., Milwaukee, Wis.

WARREN DAVIS, last heard of on Triangle-Dot ranch, Hanford, Cal., write.—Address L. T. No. 245.

M. E. BRICE, president of oil-well companies, Beaumont, Texas, field in 1902.—Address L. T. No. 244.

RANDOLPH H. ATKIN, please send us your present address. Mail sent you at address given us doesn't reach you.—Address A. S. HOFFMAN, care *Adventure*.

EDITH SARAH JULIETTE WALKER, my sister; last heard of in Cleveland, Ohio.—Address CHARLES J. WALKER, 16th Co., 2d Regt., U.S.M.C., Vera Cruz, Mexico.

Please notify us at once when you have found your man.

JOHN CASE, father; last heard from in Ohio in 1906.—Address DEWITT CASE, 408 N. Q Street, Richmond, Va.

Please notify us at once when you have found your man.

H. NIELL (Nielson). Native Son, late U. S. N. Likely in Australia or Canada.—Address his old shipmate, M. J. ("SCOTTY") LOGIE, U. S. S. *New Hampshire*, Vera Cruz, Mexico.

ROSCOE THOMSON, of Miles City, my brother 26; small build, brown hair and eyes. Last seen in Harlowton, Mont., October, 1912.—Address MRS. IDA BORN, 451 South 6th, East Salt Lake City, Utah.

RAYMOND C. BOSSARD, of Kansas City. Last heard of from Atlantic City in 1913. Write your pal of Wilmington boat.—Address L. ALAN WRIGHT, 4907 Walnut St., Philadelphia, Pa.

ARTHUR CHARLTON (baseball-player) formerly with Maplewood A. C., Yonkers. With me from Hastings to Uniontown on schooner "Daisy."—Address NATHAN GOLDSTEIN, P. O. Box 40, Yonkers, N. Y.

Please notify us at once when you have found your man.

WOULD the members of K Co., 18th Infantry, during 1900 to 1902 please write.—Address J. H. MCKIBBIN, Marion, Kansas.

JOHN SCHEIDELL; left Philadelphia in 50's. Arrived at Forest Hill, Placer County, California; then trace of him lost.—Address JOHN S. SCHEIDELL, 827 Adams Ave., Scranton, Pa.

CHARLES ROMPELL, last heard of him in Omaha City, Nebr., 1908. Cook for construction and railway companies. Like to know if living or dead.—Address O. BUSSE, 212 E. 65th St., New York City.

WOULD like to hear from former comrades, Company G, 5th Infantry, in Central and Western States.—Address JAMES J. HENNESSEY, 34 Linwood Street, Malden, Mass.

WILLIAM L. ROGERSON; if you see this, write me at once. Am to leave for Australia one month. Want you to go with me.—Address G. M. S., THERMAL, Cal., care of S. P. Company.

THE following have been inquired for in full in the September and October issues of *Adventure*. They can get name of inquirer from this magazine.

ANSELL, Capt. R. H. M.; (any one who worked in J. F. Marshell's and John Bruggar's paper-box shops): Arrington, Tommy; Atkin, Randolph; Barnes, William Henry; Clare, William; Clifford, Dennis; Comstock, Orns H.; Davenport, Phil: Ensign, W. H.; Hall, Charles T.; Jordan, Fred and wife; Kemp, driver in Oakland; Kilburn, A. A.; Paige, Frederick; Rampby, Will F., F. Balance, or Harry Balance; Rivers, Major Don C. A.; Russell, Charles B., hospital corps; Sarries, James H.; Shaw, William C.; Snowberger, Kirk R.; Thurber, E. T. (Tom); Troughton, J. J.; Will Martin, mail at Sydney.

MISCELLANEOUS. Comrades, Co. G, 41st Inf., and Capt. Graves' Co., 20th Inf.

NUMBERS 56, 68, 73, 76, W 93, W 107, W 140, W 150, W 153, W 183, W 184, W 189, W 195, W 203, W 211, W 212, W 215, W 218, C 189, C 198, C 205, L. T. 207. Please send us your present addresses. Letters forwarded to you at addresses given us do not reach you.—Address A. S. HOFFMAN, care *Adventure*.

MANUSCRIPTS sent us by the following are being held by us, having been returned to us as unclaimed at the addresses furnished:

W. Lynch, Trenton, N. J.; W. Mack, Pacheca, Mexico; Henry W. Edwards, New York; W. G. Gormley, Ontario, Canada; George Stillons, Chicago, Ill.; Francis Manston, Chicago, Cal.; Charles E. Mack, New York; William Barry Kane, Chocolate Bayou, Texas.

IMPORTANT NOTICE

AS ANNOUNCED in previous issues, every item will be published three times, then taken out. But in the *January* and *July* numbers of each year we will publish the names of all who have been inquired for and remain unfound.

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SOME PLEASANT WORDS

I THINK you'll be interested in seeing what ministers, educators, writers, etc., think of *Adventure*. Here are some letters which perhaps you can use with satisfaction on some friend who has hitherto refused even to examine *Adventure*, brushing it aside unread as "one of those cheap, trashy magazines."

The first is from a Lutheran minister who had previously written praising the magazine and suggesting semi-monthly publication. In thanking him, I said I should be particularly glad for a clergyman's definite opinion as to whether *Adventure* is clean and wholesome though true to life.

I know of no magazine that I feel less able to criticize. It is the *only* one I literally read from cover to cover, and I read fifteen different magazines each month. Some of these I take because certain authors whom I like appear in them, but I honestly would sacrifice them all for *Adventure*.

Adventure, to my mind, *is* a clean, strong magazine, a magazine by men for men, and that is why I like it so much.

Of course you can not bar out some of the things you have mentioned because, where men are found, these vices are found, and to separate the characters of a story from these weaknesses would result in making it unreal and impossible.—REV. F. ARNOLD BAVENDAM, Jersey City, N. J.

P. S. You may use anything that I say or have said, in any way that you see fit. F. A. B.

NOW one quoting a woman who, until her death, held high and unquestioned place in the educational work of the largest city in this hemisphere:

In a letter to me dated June 12, 1912, Miss ——— ———, first woman District Superintendent of Schools in New York, and one of the foremost educators of the day, wrote: "While I do not believe in a young man wasting his time reading magazine fiction as a rule, I think that a few evenings spent with *Adventure* will be profitable to the reader. The stories are clean, wholesome and instructive, and differ from the trash one usually finds in the magazines of to-day. The authors seem to know whereof they write and to put their whole selfs into their efforts."

The letter the above was taken from was a birthday letter to me (I am a nephew) and was part of her advice as to what I should read. I thought it might be of interest to you or your readers, and you have the family's permission to use this quotation if no mention is made of her name.

JULIAN J. PROSKANER.

P. S. Miss ——— died June 28, 1912, in Paris, and a high school for girls has just been named after her here.

By way of variety:

I have read with keen interest and great enjoyment, *every issue* of *Adventure* that has so far appeared. For two of them (in the interior of Cuba) I once paid two dollars and a bag of tobacco.—STANLEY M. COX, Merion, Pa.

Here's one from a school-teacher in one of our largest cities:

I have traveled a little bit, England, Ireland, Scotland, France, Canada, the Southwest, California and Florida, but barring "shipwreck" on the Lakes of Killarney, I've had but few adventures. Little can be expected of one who merely teaches geography in a class-room (where, by the way, I make use of *Adventure* to instil some reality into the study).

The next is from a writer. Soon you'll be reading his novel, "The Red Alphabet."

I don't believe I have missed a single number of *Adventure*, and I have enjoyed every one. One reason why I was anxious to break into your pages is that you publish the sort of stories I want to write. Your stories always have a kick and a thrill in them; they prove, by action and not by preachment, that clean living and straight thinking fit a man to meet both the greater and the lesser crises of life; and, as a rule, they show a much higher degree of literary workmanship than is found in the average story of adventure. Personally, I never could see why a story of action should be handled with less regard for the conventions of the English language than a study of character development or psychological analysis.—C. R. BARRETT, Chicago, Ill.

AND we'll close with a paragraph from *The Living Church* of June 6, 1914, written by the rector of one of the best-known churches in the East:

A guest recently in an historic rectory, I browsed among the books of my illustrious host. . . . But one book-case delighted me, as showing a kindred spirit: it was filled with hair-raising, blood-curdling tales of adventure. . . . When I spoke of it sympathetically, my host laughed and explained. He, too, is prone to insomnia; and stories like these, taking his imagination utterly outside the usual course of his own serene daily life, bring refreshment and sleep when all else fails. Why excitement of that sort should be soothing is a problem for psychologists; but so it is. When Louis Joseph Vance publishes a new story, it is a red-letter day for some of us who never yet drew sword or fired at a living target; Talbot Mundy's stirring romances of India rejoice us. . . . Nay, I go further, and acknowledge a debt of gratitude to that admirable fifteen-cent magazine, *Adventure*, such as the *Hibbert Journal* and the *Atlantic* have never inspired. (I confess this the more shamelessly when I remember that Bishop Stubbs of Oxford used to devour such tales by the dozen as he journeyed on the branch lines across his diocese.) And if any student of classical literature faults us, what is the Odyssey but a tale of adventure?

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Building Contractor	Advertising
Architectural Draftsman	Commercial Illustrating
Structural Engineer	Industrial Designing
Concrete Construction	Commercial Law
Mechan. Engineer	Automobile Running
Mechanical Draftsman	Teacher
Refrigeration Engineer	English Branches
Civil Engineer	Good English for Every One
Surveyor	Agriculture
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